



Probing the Body – Political and Medical (Empty) Authority in the New Romanian Cinema

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Abstract: Criticism (especially international criticism) has been quick in labelling the recent success and international recognition of several Romanian films directed by a young generation of filmmakers (Mungiu, Puiu, Porumboiu) as the Romanian “New Wave.”

I am interested not in questioning the appropriateness of the syntagm but in analysing several of these films as they circle around and about “authority.” I will apply the syntagm “Romanian New Wave” as a tool of analysis, as an umbrella term underlying that which is common to the different directors as opposed to the numerous differences that (naturally) are there as well.

My intention is not to uncover a common theoretical platform of these directors (criticism agrees that there is no such thing) but a certain ‘Romanian worldview’ as it emerges from the preoccupations of a generation of filmmakers, a view broken into small pieces (as against monolithic representations) easier to analyse but which always affect and reflect back at the viewer. The originality and the international appeal of these films rest on their capacity of revealing the mechanisms at work in giving and taking authority/power with a sensitivity and a realism ripened and finely tuned by the experience and the legacy of a totalitarian political and social system.

Towards an understanding of the “Romanian New Wave”

Criticism (especially international criticism) has been quick in labelling the recent success and international recognition of several Romanian films directed by a young generation of filmmakers (Mungiu, Puiu, Porumboiu to name just a few) as the Romanian “New Wave.” The category is generally disliked by Romanian critics and filmmakers alike who consider that these directors and their films

can be viewed as a group for mainly two reasons: they received (international) recognition at around the same time and are about the same age. Several issues are at stake here: first (against the idea of “new wave”), there is the need to recognise the individual talent of each auteur/director, and second (in support of the view that there is a “new wave”), to take note of contemporary filmmakers’ stated intention of distancing themselves from what has previously been considered a certain tradition of Romanian filmmaking. Nevertheless, the syntagm Romanian “New Wave” functions well as a tool of analysis, as an umbrella term underlying that which is common to the different directors as opposed to the numerous differences that (naturally) are there as well.

As one of the Romanian film critics put it, when referring to today’s Romanian cinema we speak about a “new generation,” rather than a “new wave” since “the directors do not belong to a distinct group and they do not cultivate the same aesthetics” (Laurențiu Brătan in an article published in the Romanian magazine 22, special issue 5th October 2007¹). In the same issue of the magazine one of the well-known Romanian film critics, Alex. Leo Șerban, insists we should not talk about waves but of individuals; according to Cristi Puiu, a contemporary filmmaker, this so-called “new wave” does not exist; the term is a fiction and a label. The Romanian critics’ discontent with the terminology is echoed in a recent article published in Sight & Sound in February 2010 entitled *The politics of national cinema* written by Shane Danielsen. The focus of the article is “a decade of revolutionary cinema” roughly from the 1990s to the present. According to Danielsen, *any* “new wave” can be understood as “the emergence of a small group of recognised ‘global’ directors who quickly transcend their national origins to become international stars” (Danielsen 2010, 40), a definition which supports from the outside the position of the Romanian critics and filmmakers.

What we definitely seem to know when talking about “new waves” is that newer and newer waves will emerge without being able to predict where, how and why the next new wave will ensue because, as Danielsen rightly puts it, there is no one set of circumstances, no identifiable cause and effect pattern for their emergence even if we only look at a short period of time; and, finally, that in most cases we are talking about art cinema productions accessible to a reduced number of viewers.

1 In a special issue of the magazine 22 under the title “*Cinema – the New Generation*” critics and filmmakers reflect upon the common characteristics of the New Romanian Cinema, the elements of discontinuity and/or continuity between the younger and the older generation of filmmakers, the success of the contemporary filmmakers abroad and the financing system of CNC (National Cinema Centre). <http://www.revista22.ro/cinema-noua-generatie-4053.html>

This paper is a result of the increased international recognition of “all things Romanian” (unmatched at the domestic level) and a fascination with communism and its effects on contemporary Romania as it emerges from the work of two of the most celebrated film-makers, Cristi Puiu and Cristian Mungiu.

I have chosen for discussion Cristi Puiu’s *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (*Moartea Domnului Lăzărescu*, 2005) and Cristian Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 Luni, 3 Săptămâni și 2 Zile*, 2007) because the first is considered the film that set the style of the new Romanian cinema (i.e. its minimalist realist aesthetic) and the second gained recognition as quality (i.e. arthouse) cinema being awarded the Palm d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007. Indisputably, both led to the international rise of Romanian cinema. Or as one of the Romanian critics jokingly put it in a footnote: “Romanian film can be divided into two periods, namely, B.C.P. (*before* Cristi Puiu) and A.M (*after* Mungiu).” (Șerban 2009, 347.)

I am interested in discussing how these films force us to re-evaluate² state-socialism understood as the power of the state over the everyday/private (powerless) individual while addressing the question of why is this re-evaluation of state-socialism in Romanian film possible now? Or to repeat a question that Danielsen³ asks: “why [...] did the Romanians take so long to process the end of communism?” (Danielsen 2010, 42.) I am interested in analysing the ways in which authority (or the lack of it) is represented in these two films in order to show how received ideas about socialism are successfully interrogated and reformulated. What is achieved by downplaying “the Romanian state” as an authoritative presence in these films?

The impetuses behind this paper are the seemingly unrelated opinions of two critics (one domestic and one international) that focused and helped articulate my position towards these films. First is the article written by A. O. Scott for the New York Times entitled *New Wave on the Black Sea* in which he pointed to the fact that “[t]he emptiness of authority – whether generational, political or conferred by elevated social status – is an unmistakable theme in the work of nearly all the younger Romanian filmmakers” (Scott 2008, 4) and second is Oana

2 Besides marking the effort to recuperate marginalised aspects of history, the return to the everyday was also an act of revaluation. [...] Social relationships, in particular, had to be reinvestigated, and such a reassessment had to start not from above, the site of moral judgment, but from below, from the materiality of the objects this disappearing culture left behind (Constantin Pârvulescu 2009).

3 In his article *The politics of national cinema* the question arises in the context of seeing “unusual auspicious historical opportunities” (Danielsen 2010, 42) with reference to the French New Wave as a symptom and not a cause in itself and only visible in hindsight.

Uricaru's article published in the Film Quarterly entitled *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days: the Corruption of Intimacy* in which she points to the fact that in almost all the films of the New Romanian Cinema events of the recent historical past are represented without vehemence or nostalgia. (Uricaru 2008.)

A lot of criticism applied to socialism (e.g. Gail Kligman and Susan Gal) works on the assumption that the personal, intimate relationships were subversive and provided a point of resistance to the authority of the state. Such an approach tends to absolve citizens from complicity with the system and offers a safe position and moral distance from "the evils perpetrated by the system on its citizens"⁴. It is worth mentioning that A. O. Scott in his article reminds us that, in Romania, communism was not only a foreign imposition, but also "an indigenous outgrowth." (Scott 2008, 6.)

In what follows, I argue that a number of discourses and registers, characteristic of dialogues in the two films that I have chosen as the focus of this paper, are suggestive of a reading which questions the obviousness of these assumptions or references. In these films, that which seems to be invested with formal authority is devoid of authority and that which seems powerless is in fact pregnant with a power-laden agency/capacity to control. The gaze of the viewer then is bi-directional; it is both directed towards certain characters as formal embodiments of power and (more importantly/subversively for us) redirected towards the powerless/other character as a potential source of power.

The approach that I argue for may also explain the lack of domestic recognition of the contemporary Romanian films. What if the negative reactions to these films are rooted in a reading according to which these films are judged against Romanian films made in the 1990s by film-makers of the "old wave" such as Lucian Pintilie and Mircea Daneliuc who started their career under the censorship of communism but are active to this day? Romanian films made in the 90s already address and process "the end of communism" through "tragic satires, intense verbal and visual violence, and political allegories" (Pârvolescu 2009).

4 Contemporary discourse on communism, that I would like to call *demonising discourse on communism* is saturated by common place expressions and phrases that have been rendered meaningless because of overuse, therefore I feel the need to put everything in quotation marks. And here I have in mind expressions such as "the legacy of communism" and the "evils of the system" which seem to mean less and less as time goes by. See for example a book bearing the title *The Social Legacy of Communism* and edited by James R. Millar and Sharon L. Wolchik published by Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press in 1994, or T. Anthony Jones's talk at the Milken Institute Forum in 1999 entitled *The Legacy of Communism and Its Implications for the New Century*.

As a result of the allegorical, indirect mode of representation the films made in the early 90s (and during communism as well) felt completely unbelievable. As opposed to this earlier trend the cinematic productions after the year 2000 (the “year zero” of Romanian film, in which no film was produced) feature depictions of everyday life. It has been noted that the films tell simple stories; they focus on a single action which is usually concluded in a single day. The stories told have at their dramatic centre the life of everyday people and thus keep the plot of these films at the individual, interpersonal level.

Common Characteristics of the New Romanian Cinema

Whether we talk about a “Romanian New Wave” or about a “new generation” of Romanian film-makers, certain common characteristics emerge when looking at the cinematic production of these last couple of years. Thus, the common characteristics for most of the New Romanian Cinema have been described as realism and minimalism both in terms of *mise en scène* and performance. The tone of these films is often referred to as “fatalist deadpan” with a narration pervaded by a sarcastic, black sense of humour. In theme these are dominated by a preoccupation with the Ceaușescu era and its legacy (see Shane Danielsen, A.O. Scott, Alex. Leo Șerban, Ioana Uricaru). As a result, in the view of international criticism (for example A.O. Scott and Shane Danielsen) the New Romanian Cinema emerges as *homogeneous* – especially when compared to the South Korean or the Hungarian contemporary cinematic production which are best described as varied both in theme and style – and in Danielsen’s understanding as a “movement” characterised by “a number of like-minded practitioners, mostly working together in various combinations and sharing an aesthetic that has, in this case, been shaped by their impoverished circumstances” (Danielsen 2010, 41). For example, the cinematographer Oleg Mutu worked together with both Puiu and Mungiu and the actress Luminița Gheorghiu was cast in both films – not in equally important roles though. The aesthetic referred to here has been described as minimalist, neo-realist. Opinions concur in considering that the term *minimalism* should not be taken lightly in reference to these films. Apart from being a mode of expression that can be seen as a result of “impoverished circumstances” it should be understood as “*the possibility of achieving with minimal artistic means a maximum aesthetic effect*” (my emphasis) (Șerban 2009, 134) or as Uricaru puts it: the often-mentioned minimalism is “achieved through painstaking attention to detail, carefully choreographed movements,

and an elaborate shooting strategy” (Uricaru 2008, 14-15). Mungiu in his *Notes (Însemnări)* on the making of the movie attests to this: “Behind each frame there are so many details I like to recall.” The director is careful to point out that even though many spectators assume that he allowed the actors to improvise, the reality is that “they are well-trained actors and there’s not one word in the film that hadn’t been written in the script” (Uricaru 2008, 16). This statement has to be seen in direct correlation with the dissatisfaction that many felt in relation to the unnatural dialogues in Romanian films made in the 1990s. It has been noted by many commentators that one of the strengths of contemporary Romanian films is the natural flow of dialogue and acting that allows the script to function as everyday live speech.

In order to show how these films convey/construct a particular viewpoint that goes against generally accepted assumptions about power relations, I will focus on dialogue and what it spells out for the viewer. There is a difference between the narratives in the two films: the dialogues in the *Death of Mr Lăzărescu* are detailed and lengthy (special attention needs to be given to the registers applied) while in *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* the dialogue is careful not to say too much.

(Failed) Communication Makes Visible Unequal Power Relations

According to the words of the director of the *Death of Mister Lăzărescu*, Cristi Puiu, “the film speaks about communication, we⁵ show relationships between three characters as often as possible: Two people talk, the third person mediates. But I also find that this triangular relationship doesn’t work at all.” (Production notes – Interview with Cristi Puiu on the site of Balkan Black Box festival.)

The *Death of Mister Lăzărescu* is a film set in the present, that is, Romania of the year 2005, but it speaks about the past. The film is framed by a song played at the beginning and at the end interpreted by Margareta Pâslaru, a husky voiced singer prominent on the Romanian musical stage of the 80s. The singer and the song might escape the international audience but it could not escape a certain generation of viewers and more significantly the main character itself. Since the film offers very few details about Mr Lăzărescu’s earlier life the song that we can hear from the off space can also function as a reminder of a *life* that the character had when he was still a feeling and able human being. From the moment the film starts he is dead as a human being. Who Mr Lăzărescu is and what he does is

5 i.e. Cristi Puiu and Răzvan Rădulescu, co-screenwriter.

informed by the past. His presence is strongly and sometimes annoyingly physical as his bodily malfunctions form a central focus of the film. He is dying, and the viewers witness his journey towards the end without any clue about what might go on in his head, about the last image of this world that he will have.⁶

What has been many times stated is that Mr Lăzărescu represents Everyman in his lonely journey towards death (which seems liberating compared to the life he led) but Paul Arthur convincingly argues that the opposite is true. In his article *Habeas Corpus. A Meditation on The Death of Mr Lăzărescu and Corporeal Cinema*, Arthur shows not only that Mr Lăzărescu has been too carefully chosen and brilliantly played to be Everyman, but that his slowly failing body can be the symbolical embodiment of a society undergoing transition from communism to capitalism “that inevitably foster[s] some of the worst features of each.” (Arthur 2006, 46.)

I have chosen to analyse a scene that comes towards the end of the film. It is a representative scene both from the point of view of communication between the characters but also for conveying the specific slowness that is [Puiu finds] so characteristic of Romania and its people.

Up to this point the tension has been already built up to almost unbearable limits. The viewer has been exposed to a range of feelings (from irony to pity through anger, frustration and powerlessness). It is not only the length of the film that allows us to go through all these emotions, but also the sense of time that pervades the film achieved by filming in almost real time. We arrive at yet another hospital with a renewed sense of urgency. Finally, it seems at least there is some sort of diagnosis and the operation is about to happen.

The doctor starts by introducing himself and explaining the medical problem to the patient. His description of the patient's symptoms is lengthy and it is medical jargon that we hear. He is interrupted by Mr Lăzărescu who reiterates his complaints (he has a headache because of his ulcer). Mr Lăzărescu is agitated, tries to show where the pain is located but is stopped by the doctor who congratulates him on his good stance but asks him to stay calm and not to talk because at this point it is already difficult to make out what he says. The doctor's tone is a comforting one, as if trying to ease the patient's concerns.

There are two significant moments when the focus shifts from the doctor to the patient and then to the nurse. The three party communication allows this shift and it reveals the power positions at stake. The perceived centre of authority,

6 This question, what is a dying person's last image, is one that preoccupied Cristi Puiu while making this film as he disclosed in an interview.

i.e. the doctors are deemed impotent and therefore invested in the powerless, i.e. the patient and the nurse.

First, it is a piece of black humour: the doctor asks: “Do you have any relatives?” to which Mr Lăzărescu answers: “No, I have an ulcer.” Laughter starts forming in our throat (not the liberating kind of laughter, but one that represents a break from the all pervasive tension), as we realise that these two lines sum up the last years of Mr Lăzărescu’s existence (his loneliness, his lack of relatives, the only thing that he can still possess besides his cats is his ulcer).

The second interruption comes from the nurse. She jumps in briefing the doctor not only on the personal details of the patient’s life but also on his medical condition. She is concerned, a little impatient; she tries to overtake the doctor’s slow explanatory rhythm. The doctor looks at the nurse in disbelief, hands in pockets, head slightly tilted to the side. When expressing his disbelief at her intervention, the doctor looks at the female doctor also present at the patient’s head. We have the desired composition: three characters in a conversation. But nobody is mediating; on the contrary, they work against each other, excluding from the conversation the socially inferior nurse.

“Unbelievable, isn’t it?” says the male doctor. His scorn and contempt is directed to the nurse, while totally ignoring her; he looks at his female colleague as if to his only equal partner in this conversation. Then, switching to the nurse he continues: “I thought the doctor was exaggerating but you really don’t show us any respect.”

In her turn, the female doctor doesn’t spare words to assert her position. She lectures the nurse: “First of all, you should start learning your place and letting us do our job.” She is condescending, looking down on the nurse, irritated at her interrupting *their* professionalism. They are all medically trained people, or as the doctor clearly put it: “we are medical staff of different qualifications, nurse” – turning to her, hands still in his pockets – “You don’t go teaching me, a doctor, the procedures. Doing that is called insolence. And from this very moment, if you want to stay I will ask you to keep your mouth shut. Or else, you can wait in the hallway.”

As if it weren’t clear enough, the Doctor spells out their different hierarchical positions where only *some* can teach and lecture others.

When the nurse expresses her wish to take the patient away he is irritated by her impertinence, daring to take a decision that hierarchically speaking is not hers to take. “I’ll have to repeat myself” – says the doctor with the tone of: oh, these annoying children who won’t understand the rules when they are first told – and he again explains how this kind of decision is only his to take.

The scene goes on in pretty much the same manner and again nothing happens for the patient or everything happens to take him to his inexorable end.

We also find out the doctor is not only preoccupied with observing a procedure, but firmly believes in the patient's right to be fully informed of his/her situation, a patient who no longer realises what is happening to him; his movements are more and more limited, his speech gets slurred and he looks around totally disoriented.

Both doctors are young and showing off their self-importance disregarding completely the possible *experience* of the nurse and, in this very particular case, her actual knowledge of the situation.

It is obvious that the only thing the two doctors care about is to establish their own authoritative position with respect to less educated medical staff. Hierarchical power relations have to be kept in place even if only seemingly so. "My characters are weak – we can recognise ourselves in them and find hope there. Sometimes they make bad choices as if they were caught up in some external mechanism" confesses Cristi Puiu in an interview.

Mioara, the nurse, oversteps her boundaries as a nurse opposing the doctor situated in a hierarchically higher position and she is lectured on it. An obvious transgression occurred and it has been successfully sanctioned. On the other hand, the doctor's authority is deemed impotent. Up to the last moment, all the doctors present in the film are empty white coats seemingly in possession of self-assigned authority but whose actual interventions are meaningless. They are represented at all times as more concerned with how they appear to the others' gaze without performing the authority that they should be practically invested with.

It is easy to perceive the power game at stake in *The Death...* because of its being set within the framework of an institution, that of a hospital, which functions well as a closed system that not only has the ability to deny access to some people while allowing others to enter, but also as a territory marked by clear boundaries within which individuals who belong there are visually marked by the hospital uniform – differently coloured white for doctors (top of the hierarchy), and orange for paramedics. It is an organised system.

There is another aspect of communication in the film, one that records conversations between doctors and all others around Mr Lăzărescu about things that do not concern the patient. Such instances can have two effects: since it is filmed in (almost) real time it adds to the slow pace of the film and it adds humour, a sarcastic, black humour that frames the story.

In my reading of the film, failed communication reveals lack of authority not only in cases exposing hierarchical power relations in between medical staff of

different qualifications but also when we look at the ways in which the personal conversations constantly interfere with the professional medical discourse. The personal conversations between medical staff construct and add meaning to the characters in the film.

At the beginning of the scene described earlier, the viewer sees the same doctor going in and out of the examination room trying to call his wife and earlier we witnessed a conversation between him and the woman doctor when he borrows her phone because his battery ran out. The personal lives of the doctors keep interfering with professional duty, which results in slowness and induces feelings of frustration, even anger to the viewer. As a result, the doctors seem only invested in having their authority position recognised without acting on it, hence the term “emptiness of authority.” The doctors are most active when trying to resolve personal problems; otherwise they are depicted as slow and intent on following the procedure as opposed to being professionally active.

The hospital becomes the place where the private and the public spheres of social interaction overlap. There are no clear distinctions between the two, they constantly interfere. The dialogue is carefully written, different registers apply (the familiar and the professional) simultaneously contained in the same space marked visually as an institution. I will refer to another example. This overlap between the private life of the patient and the medical history of the patient influences the doctors when putting a diagnosis: the fact that the doctors smell alcohol on his breath leads them to assumptions about his medical condition while at the same time belittling the patient, who – since he is drinking – is deemed undeserving of proper attention and medical investigation. His headache is not dealt with, not taken into consideration as a symptom, because it is represented as a consequence of the patient’s drinking problem.

There is one more occurrence which is worth mentioning: sarcastic humour combined with the scientific. After long struggles, the patient is finally taken to a CT scan. The doctor instructs the nurse to set the patient in position with the following words: “Put him on the slide.” As if the patient is just a child who arrived at the playground and needs grown-ups’ help. And then, the doctor explains, “We shall take a picture of the liver and one of the penthouse.”⁷ During the same scene the doctor instructs the patient: “Don’t breathe now, we start

7 This is a poor translation of the original Romanian: “O poză la pateu și una la mansardă.” “Pateu” is actually a spread made of liver sold in tins (and quite cheap to buy) and “mansardă” can only derogatively be understood as the locus of the brain, but actually means the top floor, the attic – usually not inhabited, just a place where you collect objects that have a symbolic value only for their owner as memories of a past life.

launching. Attention! 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0.” The machine makes the doctor behave like a child in front of his new toy. Not only does he associate this routine test with a mock space launch but he starts talking to the neoplasm shown on the scan: “This deserves a picture. Smile.”

As I have shown the doctors in *The Death of Mister Lăzărescu* act like figurants in a play in which they choose not to participate. They are more concerned with having their authority acknowledged than acting on it. Communication and dialogue serve making this position clear. There is no gradation present, the actual starting position does not change, and the “story” unfolds, accumulates details but does not become more harmful as the narration progresses. It is even, kept level, impassioned.

The Death of Mister Lăzărescu conveys/constructs a particular viewpoint that goes against generally accepted assumptions about power relations. The dominant interpretation has been that interactions between two characters in a hierarchical power relationship refer precisely to what they seem to refer to: i.e. one powerful and one powerless. On the basis of this interpretation the powerful looks indifferent to the powerless. What happens actually is a transformation of indifference into impotence.

Negotiations with Authority Figures

Comparatively, there is a gradation present in the narration of *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days* from the innocent to the downright harmful. Authority is more explicitly present and the connection with the past as well. The film is set in the last years of communist Romania, a period described by many as the most oppressive. Both Uricaru and Pârvulescu make a point in mentioning the fact that this film remembers the past without judging, without uncritical nostalgia and it considers oppression no longer to be directly linked to government practices and to its leaders, but focuses on oppression’s spectral dimension – still “there” but harder to pin down at the level of everyday behaviour (Uricaru 2008, Pârvulescu 2009). In analysing oppression and authority from a scale that goes from the innocent to the harmful, I have chosen to address a couple of scenes that can be considered (with one significant exception) even marginal to the story. The first fifteen minutes of the film carefully construct the atmosphere of a 1980s student dorm by introducing props (objects – soaps, shampoos, brand names, even rental movie titles) evocative of a certain historical period. It is a lengthy introduction that allows the viewer to experience this world or to remember it (if he or she has

lived through it). It is the innocent part, where human interaction is still possible, where people make do with what they have and fend for each other. Some critics (Pârvolescu and Uricaru) consider this introduction as a depiction of an oasis of human dignity but I tend to disagree. Such a view would encourage a belief that there was a corner of this world left untouched by “the workings of the system.” As Uricaru puts it “while it was relatively easy to resist the cult of personality and to laugh at exaggerated reports of economic successes, it was much more difficult to even diagnose what the twisted gender politics, the intricate system of arbitrary interdictions, and the collection of social constraints were actually doing to our minds as we were attempting to adapt and survive” (Uricaru 2008, 15).

I intend to look at several scenes where the main character, Otilia is confronted with *authority* in its various locations because I intend to show how authority was present and harmful not even but especially at the level of everyday interactions. The first two short scenes are depictions of the main character’s encounter with authority that derives its power from the centre, that is, the state.

The official representatives of the state in *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* have no authority even though they seem to be invested with it formally. For example, at the hotel reception where Otilia has managed to secure a room, the two policemen don’t even pretend to be any kind of authority, they are more preoccupied with joking with the hotel manager than actually insisting on seeing Otilia’s identification. Their authority is unproblematically dismissed. Otilia just goes on doing what she wants to do, after performing a sort of trial to conform. Also, in an earlier scene when Otilia is taking a bus without having a ticket,⁸ the ticket inspectors have their authority undermined. Otilia manages to get a ticket and punch it before the controllers ask for it. The ticket controllers are also lower level formal embodiments of power.

The situation changes once at the personal level, when authority acts unexpectedly, from unexpected positions. When trying to reserve a room at the hotel, Otilia has to perform a full ritual of getting the attention of the receptionist who takes turns at ignoring, patronising and belittling her. The first attempt is deemed unsuccessful, but the resourceful “heroine” manages to bribe a receptionist at another hotel.

8 This scene is also described in detail by Mungiu in his *Notes* on two accounts. The first is an explanation of how a long-take functions well in keeping not only depth of image but ensuring continuity: Otilia leaves the dorm going through corridors, down the stairs and then is followed by the camera from the back as she walks through a patch of green to board the bus – all in one take. And the second is a humorous description of the overzealous “ticket controller” who managed to reach Otilia before having punched the borrowed ticket, even though she was instructed otherwise.

But it all turns terribly serious when another service provider steps in. In order to get an illegal abortion, the two women arrange for an abortionist who comes to their hotel room.

Again, we are witnessing a triangle conversation between Mr Bebe, Otilia and Gabița. Mr Bebe has arrived to perform the abortion and is about to say what he expects as payment. He demands sexual favours from both in exchange for his complicity in an act considered criminal and thus punishable by law. I will not go into describing the scene because I am interested in the emotional reactions that it engendered.

One reading of the film would consider Mr Bebe as the direct product of a time and an age and therefore not to be blamed entirely. He is what he is and does what he does because of an oppressive and controlling system which created his job and the clients for it. In this sense it is relevant to hear the director's words: "I intend to talk about this period without making direct reference to communism, but through a set of stories that look at personal choices in a time of unfortunate events that people had to go through as if these were the obvious things to happen" (synopsis of the film).

Alexandru Budac in a dialog with Alex. Leo Șerban talks about Mr Bebe in the following terms. He assigns Mr Bebe the position of an "efficient pawn." "He must not be made into a symbol, because he is a real character (based on real people), not a cardboard character (unnatural or unreal). His desires, reactions, fears and anger are not that of a "new man," but of an immoral man. I can easily see him operating in contemporary Romania, naturally, within a different "area of expertise." But Mr Bebe reminds us all too well of the specific fears of the communist regime in order to be taken out of the historical context altogether. He knew – as a being who knows how to adapt – how to find the means to survive within the system, while dodging it at the same time (Șerban 2009, 154-156).

In an article published in the Romanian online magazine *LiterNet*, the artistic director of the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF), Mihai Chirilov says that instead of journalism that only seeks to diminish the accomplishments of the film he prefers the emotional reactions of domestic or international audiences. Among the emotional responses to the film, Chirilov mentions the furious question of an Englishman from Brighton concerned with the current fate of those abortionists that he identified with members of the "Securitate." Mr Bebe is equated with the system, with the body that was invested with sustaining the system, the political militia (the same organ that Mr Bebe feared terribly for putting him in jail for performing the illegal abortion). It is exactly this collapsing

of the controlling, oppressive power of the state with the power of the individual that interests me the most. For other viewers (Christina Anghelina on *LiterNet*) he belongs to a type: the outspoken Romanian, resourceful and capable, who lands on his feet no matter the situation and who would “sell even his mother.” You can see him everywhere, on the tram, on the beach, in pubs, in hotels and on the *corridors of public institutions* (my emphasis). He is your next door neighbour, your host in a village, who pulled the right cords and has built a small pension or a pub; he is the man who despises women with one possible exception, his own mother. But he is not afraid to scold and reprimand even her.

Re-evaluating State-Socialism in Romania

From the above reactions the characteristics of the “new man” forged in state-socialist Romania were revealed: opportunistic, controlling, profit oriented and exploitative, adjectives that bring to mind the descriptions applied to ruthless capitalists. This brings me back to my original question: why is this re-evaluation of state-socialism in Romania possible now? Possibly because these films which focus on everyday life were made in a period when in the contemporary Romanian society the “full social and intellectual impact of ‘real-existing capitalism’” was felt (Pârvulescu 2009) and because the main “culprit” of power has disappeared, leaving us one option – to look *elsewhere* than the “totalitarian state” to explain everyday violences, coercions and “horrors.”

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