



The Grammar of the New Romanian Cinema

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Abstract. In order to identify a common language of the new wave of Romanian directors and to find a definition of a “grammar” for the new Romanian moviemaking, we need to look for the paradigmatic codes of this type of cinema. Discussing the definitions given to this cinematographic phenomenon, remarkable by the multiple awards received in the last decade on film festivals, this paper identifies several traits which make the “new wave” in the Romanian cinema fundamentally a European Wave. If there is a new-new-wave in the Romanian cinema, this has a common style and aesthetics. The author is looking for the “grammatical” characteristics of several contemporary Romanian authors, offering a general description of its commonalities.

In the last decade the Romanian Cinema has become one of the most important movements in European moviemaking, its international success and its recognition by the media and by several festival juries was considered somewhat of a revelation. Increasingly, Romanian cinema studios offered a place for cheap moviemaking for both consecrated Romanian directors established in the West (like Lucian Pintilie, Radu Gabrea or Florin Mihăileanu) to make their movies here, with the technical support of local production teams, and for some of the most important directors in the West (and from the US), like Francis Ford Coppola, Anthony Minghella, Costa Gavras or even Sacha Baron Cohen, who filmed their movies on location in Romania. More recently the Romanian cinematographic infrastructure is providing resources for other European moviemakers to develop their own productions (as was the case with the movie made by the German director, Didi Danquart, whose story was written by Cristi Puiu, or in the case of Tudor Giurgiu, who has produced Peter Strickland’s movie, *Katalin Varga* (2009). Some Romanian moviemakers, like Nae Caranfil, were already working and living in the West for some years now – for example Caranfil was directing *Dolce far niente* (1998), a European collaborative project (financed by production companies like Sintra, K2, France 2 Cinéma, CNC,

Eurimages). In the case of Caranfil, he somehow claimed that his movie *Sundays on Leave* (*É pericoloso sporgersi*, 1993) was a prototype for Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which made the Romanian cinema even more influential.

Considering all these changes and contexts, it is obvious that we are witnessing an important development, the question is if this is a part of a new cinematography, or is this only a generational reaction, or maybe it is only a result of the European funds coming into the Romanian cinema? Simultaneously, the main question of this paper is if this large group of directors shares anything in common, if there is a "code," or a language, or a syntax, or maybe a common ground on which this success can be explained in terms of movie criticism?

1. Is it or is it not a "New Wave"?

Romanian cinema criticism has been debating for almost a decade the existence of a new wave of directors and the definition of this "new" Romanian moviemaking. This debate was transmitted to the foreign cinema critics. Is there or is there not a new wave, this is the question (following the pun from "was there or was there not?") *A fost sau n-a fost*, the exact translation of the Romanian title for the *12:08 East of Bucharest*, 2006, director Corneliu Porumboiu) (cf. Scott, 2008).

The problem with the definition comes from the fact that the concept itself of a "new wave" was rejected by some of the directors themselves. In a purely chronological sense, we cannot speak about a new wave, because the new wave in the Romanian cinema was already occupied by authors like Lucian Pintilie, Liviu Ciulei and Mircea Daneliuc, who in the 60s and late 70s won some? or rather: considerable European recognition for their movies. Unfortunately all the examples of previous successes are rare and incoherent; in 1957 Ion Popescu Gopo got for his short animation *Short History* (*Scurta istorie*, 1957) the Palme d'Or for short film, in 1965, Liviu Ciulei was awarded the prize for best director in Cannes for his historical movie *The Forrest of the Hanged* (*Pădurea Spânzuraților*, 1965) and in 1966, *The Revolt* (*Răscoala*, 1965) made by Mircea Mureșan was awarded for the best debut movie. It is regrettable that, also due to the installing of the new Ceaușescu directives, similar to those in North Coreea and China, turned the Romanian cinema towards a new socialist realism. The only significant award was won in 1985 by Dan Pița, who received the Silberner Bär Honorable Mention in Berlin for *Passo Doble* (*Pas în doi*, 1985).

So although there is only a faint sign of an "old wave," their accomplishments were always a guideline for the "new" generations, as well as sources for theoretical

controversy. For example Cristi Puiu, one of the forerunners of the so called new-wave denies both the existence of the “old wave,” represented by Liviu Ciulei or later Mircea Daneliuc, and the existence of the new wave. For Puiu this term (Romanian new wave) is only a piggybacking of the Nouvelle Vague, conceived for the use of the Western media. “The old wave was a happy accident as we are today happy accidents,” says Puiu (interviewed by Fulger, 2006).

On the other hand, for some of the critics, Nae Caranfil, the author of *Filantropica* (2001), is considered to be the first “new waver.” Mihai Fulger (2006) describes Caranfil as a director who has anticipated the “new wave,” yet among the 12 contemporary directors interviewed for his book on the “new wave,” there are none who would agree that there is a new wave, and the most important new-wave movie maker, that is Caranfil himself, is also against the concept, saying that the critics like to invent “waves,” “generations” and other formulas only to fit their intentions. Actually Caranfil rejects the mere possibility of a new wave, he himself declaring that he does not belong to such a group. Caranfil considers that a “new Dogma” is catastrophic for the young generation of directors, to whom he feels close, but he declares not to be a part of.

While Cristi Puiu (cited by A. O Scott in New York Times) and others of his colleagues are vituperative contestants of the existence of the new wave in the Romanian cinema, some Romanian critics seem to have an “all inclusive” view of the concept. At the other end of this perspective is Grig Modorcea (2006), one of the old guard movie critics in Romania, who claims that there is a new wave starting with January 1990. For this kind of an approach there is a chronological and quantitative side of the new-wave. Modorcea overviews 54 movies made by 43 directors, belonging to the “new wave,” even if some of the movies quoted as “new” were developed during the communist period. This generous (yet absurd) view of the new wave, which is more chronological than conceptual, includes all the fiction movies viewed in the post-communist period – there is no genre distinction between authors like Mircea Plângău (the teen movie spoof *High School Alert* [*Liceenii în alertă*, 1993]) and Nae Caranfil’s *É pericoloso sporgersi*, no difference between the pseudo-horror *Nekro* (1997) directed by Viorel Mihalcea and Cristian Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, 2007), between the *Train of Life* (*Train de vie*, 1998) by Radu Mihăileanu and *Garcea and the Oltenians* (*Garcea și oltenii*, 2001) by Sam Irvin or between *The Paper Will Be Blue* (*Hârtia va fi albastră*, 2006) de Radu Muntean and the soap-opera *Tears of Love* (*Lacrimi de iubire*, 2005) by Iura Luncașu. The only criterion suggested by Modorcea is the concept of a “generation without complexes,” which

means for Modorcea the total lack of limits in the subjects tackled. In terms of chronological evolution, the new “new wave” could be described as including the contemporary, that is post-communist (post 1989), screenplays and movies. But even for Caranfil, some of the screenplays he made into films (even the most recent film, *The Rest is Silence* [*Restul e tăcere*, 2007]) are developed before 1989, which makes them non-“new-wave.”

Another plausible definition of the “new wave” could be the success of the movies on the market – but in this contest the winners are not the “new wave” directors (the only one who reached the highest margin of viewers was Mungiu with *Tales from the Golden Age* [*Amintiri din epoca de aur*, 2009]), for example a so called comedy like *Garcea and the Oltanians*, using the mere criterion of viewership, is more entitled to be a part of the “new wave,” while movies like *12:08 East of Bucharest* (with 15.000 viewers) become irrelevant in a marketing context.

I think we should reject all of these criteria: post-communist debutants in cinema are not automatically identifiable with the “new wave;” chronological appearance of the movies and the sheer belonging to a certain generation does not qualify a director for the “new wave;” and viewership references are not valid in describing the quality of the movies.

2. Is it a New, or is it a Post (New) Wave?

In order to escape this logic of contradictions I propose another term, and the terminological shift can be extremely useful in the context of the conceptual definition of the new generation of Romanian directors. One possible term was conceived for the Eastern European cinema after communism, the notion of a “post new wave” suggested by Daniel J. Goulding (1989) is one option. Another option could be the concept of a “new-new wave,” proposed by Peter Hames (1985), which adds to the chronological separation between the several generations of directors.

For the use of this paper I will go with the term “new-new wave,” for one main reason, I believe that this “post new wave” is strongly tied with the “new wave” definition of the French New Wave, which can be easily applied to the new Romanian directors. The (new) “new wave” is an aesthetic adventure and is based on the emergence of new talents (Ruscart, 1986). Another tie with the Nouvelle Vague is that suggested by Noel Burch (Burch, 1959), who defined the “nouvelle vague” according not only to a generational standard – they were all young directors around 32 years old – but also with an artistic solidarity, they all belonged to an aesthetics coagulated into a “school of film.” A third reason is that

the cultural atmosphere, pervasive to film production and film making in France (de Baecque, 1998), is similar to the stream of young directors flooding the Romanian film industry in the last decades, all emulating each other in a competition meant to change the “atmosphere” in the moviemaking industry. Also, the debates in *Cahiers du Cinema*, which has generated the Nouvelle Vague in France are to be found at the individual level with each and every one of the new Romanian directors – this will be developed later.

So what is this “new-new wave,” and since there is a constant addition to these waves, how many waves are there? Or is there any wave left, since these young directors keep coming back?

3. A “New-New Wave” Striking Repeatedly on the Shores of Cannes

This “new-new wave” can be characterized by its international recognition, most of these films were first viewed abroad and their value was determined more by festival juries and movie critics in the West, and less by the Romanian viewership and critics – sometimes the recognition of European festivals and Western movie critics was followed by a dismissal at home.

The “birth” of the “new-new wave” was heralded by a golden streak of prizes, that ended up into another wave of rewards and international recognitions – so we can say that, if there is a “new-new wave,” it is first a wave of prizes, before being a conceptual framework. In terms of chronological order, everything started with Cristi Puiu, and his short movie, *Stuff and Dough* (*Marfa și banii*, 2001), selected for the *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* in Cannes, in 2001. Although *Stuff and Dough* did not get any prize, this “renewal” of the Romanian cinema was soon followed by *West* (*Occident*, 2002), made by Mungiu, and *The Fury* (*Furia*, 2002), by Radu Muntean. The first visible sign was in 2004, when Cristi Puiu (the same director who started it all) was awarded the Golden Bear in Berlin for another short film, *Cigarettes and Coffee* (*Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea*, 2004), and the next year, in 2005, his fiction movie *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, 2005), was awarded at Cannes Film Festival’s “Un Certain Regard” section. This rhythm of winnings, fueled by a positive competition among the young directors, continued and the lucky streak included *Traffic* (*Trafic*, 2004), by Cătălin Mitulescu, who won Palme d’Or for Best Short in Cannes in 2004, Corneliu Porumboiu’s *Police, Adjective* (*Polițist, adjectiv*, 2008) got the FIPRESCI Prize (Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique) and the prize of

the Jury “Un Certain Regard” in Cannes, 2009, while his debut movie, *12:08 East of Bucharest*, got Camera d’Or, in Cannes, 2006.

What began with a short film (*Stuff and Dough* by Cristi Puiu), without prizes, but with a great press, ended with Cristian Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, getting the Great Prize of the European Film Academy, Berlin in 2007, Palme d’Or and FIPRESCI, at Cannes. As Alex Leo Șerban has eloquently described it, “Puiu planted the seed, Porumboiu wetted the plant and Mungiu got to pick up the fruits” (2009).

Later Mungiu made some fruits of his own, and obtained for *Tales from the Golden Age* the prize for the Best Film at the Stockholm Film Festival, while Radu Muntean made *Summer Holiday (Boogie)*, 2008), winning the prize of the Jury, Essonne Film Festival, France while his *The Paper Will Be Blue* was awarded special prize of the Jury, Namur Film Festival, Belgium.

These remarkable prizes compose the short list of the “new-new wave” of Romanian directors: Puiu, Muntean, Porumboiu, Mungiu, Mitulescu. They are the main object of my interpretation of the new Romanian cinematographic grammar.

4. So, Is There Any Explanation for This Wave of Prizes?

In order to describe a “grammar,” or a “language” of cinema, there has to be a material support and a rational (albeit theoretical) reasoning for the cinematic structure. One plausible explanation is that all of these directors worked with only one camera. So, if their link is a single camera – that one “magic” camera has provided all the prizes, thus it is a technological explanation and there is a technological determinism to this success. Following a declaration Cristian Mungiu made at the presentation of his most recent movie, *Tales from the Golden Age* at TIFF (Transylvania Film Festival) 2009, there is a certain legend among the Romanian directors, that one camera has it all, so they try to rent the same camera over and over again.

Of course, this movie folklore covers more than a simple joke, it is a superstition that gives us an insight into what most of the “new wave” directors have in common: certain camera techniques that are common to all of these directors. It becomes obvious that the new Romanian filmmakers have in common the same group of actors (for example Dragoș Bucur played in the majority of the “new-newwave” movies) and a small group of technical crew which is sometimes the same for various directors. These commonalities bring up some stylistic common elements: long takes, fixed camera, Dogma 95 style of lighting, urban settings and

minimalism of the storytelling. All these are techniques that can be described as fundaments of a common “grammatical” approach to the Romanian new cinema.

This argument is based on some interviews in which the most representative directors of the new generation have presented their view on cinematic language. While Cristi Puiu remains one of the most aggressive deniers of the common denominator as a “new wave,” he agrees that there is a certain “style” his colleagues might have taken from him, which is the predisposition for realism (quoted in Raluca Ion and Diana Marcu 2010). The same is suggested by Corneliu Porumboiu, who at the same time concedes that there is a certain “aesthetic of the long takes” and that most of the movies he and his colleagues have made are based on a certain unity of time and space, namely that they happen within a single day (quoted in Raluca Ion and Diana Marcu 2010).

Style, aesthetics, time and space unity... these are all elements of a common grammar of cinema, whether they like it or not.

5. The “New Wave” and the “New Europe”?

Before discussing the elements of aesthetics and of cinematic grammar, I need to make an argument in favour of the fact that there is a “new wave” in the Romanian cinema simply because it is fundamentally a European Wave, one that partakes in the invention of the “new Europe” with cinematic mechanisms. These new directors obviously respond and react to the concept in the Maastricht Treaty, defined as the creation of “a common European character.” The desire to create a common European cinema market of a productions and distribution system that could compete with the American conglomerates has long been a topic for theoretical and practical construction of the European cinema. An unclear concept in itself, the British Film Institute dedicated a session of discussions on the topic of the European cinema in 1990, and the participants in the “Screening Europe” conference could not identify a single trait for such a concept.

First of all this is due to the fact that the European cinema is searching for its inspiration (and its global breadth) since WWI, when the French cinema industry lost pace to the American studio system. For a while the German expressionism seemed to provide the resources for such an inspiration (and they were exiled by the Nazi regime), then the Russian cinema was hailed as a beacon of light and, subsequently, the Italian neo-realism or the British moviemakers of the 60’s, the so called neo-gaudy of the Spanish cinema in the late 70’s and 80’s, or the rediscovery of the Central European directors after the fall of the Berlin Wall –

they all seemed as a good reference to what European cinema meant and was supposed to be.

The new generation of Romanian moviemakers follow this logic – their films were made and intended for transnational audiences, and less for the Romanian (ever declining) public of moviegoers. As Mungiu said about his movie based on the urban legends of communism, *Tales from the Golden Age*, the movie, even before it was made, had the potential for film festivals, it “seemed it will be well received in Cannes,” so the director quit making the movie that the national board for cinema financed at the time, and decided instead to pursue the project entitled *The Golden Age*. This desire to blend into the European “common market of ideas” and to react to the needs of this pan-European framework is fundamental to understanding the “new-newwave” of Romanian directors.

Another problem of integrating national movie productions into a European-wide, common cultural market has led to the proliferation of co-productions throughout Europe. The co-productions system is in Romania mostly a post-1989 phenomenon, which makes it coincidental with the growing of the “new-new wave.” These “new” European directors are integrated into the “old” European cinema by a common language, that of “Europeanness” (be it the new directors in Central and Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Republics). They are slowly growing and integrated within the great discourse of the European cinema.

Dominated by the European Union philosophies of pan-European productions and modelled by the necessity of creating European-wide understandable products, the new Romanian cinema should be considered a “purely” European cinema, and thus the first level of grammatical coherence at the cinematic level is this common language.

Using Thomas Elsaesser’s (2005) concepts, there are 3 fundamental (and cinematographic) reasons (not taking into account the geographical reason) for this axiom (although, in this context, it is relevant that Elsaesser does not give a single example from the Romanian cinema, old or new). One key characteristic of the Romanian new cinema is that it is an “author centred” cinema – the director as author imprint being a specific trait to European cinema. Most (if not all) of the “new-new wave” directors are writers, directors and, in some cases, producers of their own movies. This is one of the main characteristics that bring them closer to the Nouvelle Vague, since, as shown below, the French directors of the 50’s and 60’s took pride in their authorship autonomy.

Another characteristic that is fundamentally tied to the tradition of the European cinema, from the Czech(o)(slovak) moviemakers to the Spanish ones, is that it has

a thematic development focused on national self-image, centred on recovering recent memory and providing a historical recording or recounting of contemporary historical events. The haunt of history and of the effects of history on individuals – this is a deep conceptual river running through European cinema.

Thirdly, it is a cinema oriented towards political significance and the aesthetic renewal. This renewal, again, needs to be understood within the European Union “directives” – in this respect they clearly indicate that art films, with “innovative” potential and with pan-European audience implied, are preferred to any other cultural attempts. In this logic “European” means “culture”, while at the other end is the “American” cinema, meaning “popular.” This opposition between American and European cinema is perpetuated by the Romanian “new-new wave” directors. The rejection of the Hollywood influence, and the rejection of the “Hollywood offers” are to be interpreted as expressions of the desire to join the efforts for an alternative to the standardized Hollywood-like narrativity, thus the new moviemakers in Romania are developing anarrativity that influences their “grammar.” This conscious rejection of the Hollywood influence, followed by his self-definition as a European is overtly affirmed by Mungiu. “I am not in Hollywood, instead I work in Romania, because this is the world that I know” – this quote of Cristian Mungiu speaking at a masterclass at the International Film Festival in Istanbul is a conceptual explanation for why he chose NOT to move to Hollywood. “It is easier to make accessible movies, and the Americans are good at this, but the idea is to make an uncomfortable movie for yourself,” said Mungiu (quoted by Hurriyet 2009).

Another characteristic of the new generation of filmmakers is that it is a “festival grown” generation. As Elsaesser suggested, the European film festivals are constructed as symbolic spaces, where a “new” European identity is developed. In order to have a better picture of this, we can use an example provided by Rivi (2007), who provides a list of the Best European Films awards attributed by the European Film Academy. This short list is a potpourri of national directors, comprising names from Kieslowski to Mikhalkovski, and from Almodóvar to Becker or Haneke. A true European topology of directors now includes the Romanian names such as Puiu or Mungiu.

6. Low Budgets and Independent Production Companies

The young Romanian filmmakers share a common trait, they are low-budget producers for their own movies; Corneliu Porumboiu’s case is relevant in this

discussion. Relying heavily on the financial support of his father – a rich local businessman – Cornel Porumboiu makes movies that are literally “home grown,” his last two productions were filmed in his hometown, Vaslui. (One funny fact is that Vaslui has no cinemas today).

Although Mungiu has publicly expressed his pessimistic and individualistic view of the young generation of filmmakers, he claimed that there is no Romanian cinema, there are only directors, and that the local moviemakers are not comparable with the Czech, another shared trait is that most of these young directors (Nemescu, Mungiu, Muntean, Porumboiu) are graduates of the National University of Drama and Film (U.N.A.T.C.), the traditional film school in Romania – while Cristi Puiu is an arts major – and their means of production are determined by their fund raising skills developed during school, that is, creating “great dramas” with small-time financial resources.

Another important characteristic that most of the young directors share is the fact that they want to build their own production companies, to become not only financially independent, but also to keep their creative autonomy intact. For example Thomas Ciulei has created Europolis (founded 1999), Caranfil has created Independența Film, Cristi Puiu is co-founder of Mandragora production house (since 2004), while Cristian Mungiu, Hanno Hofer and Oleg Mutu created Mobra Films (in 2003). All these efforts indicate a strong desire for independently producing movies and rejecting any studio conglomerates involvement.

7. No “Master’s” Voice

Unlike the Nouvelle Vague, the Romanian new generation had no “Master,” no theoretical guide in their search for a new cinematographic language. Cristian Mungiu is deploring this lack of a “Mentor” (in *Fulger*, 2006), saying that he “did not have Nae Caranfil’s father, one of the most active movie critics before and after Communism, who could have provided the same resource for the new generation as, let’s say, André Bazin for the French New Wave, or the chance of meeting a director who could influence his development as a filmmaker.” Singular figures or solitary encounters were made, but no significant connection with a theoretical or technical “Master” figure. Nae Caranfil’s father, Tudor Caranfil, could have played the role of a mentor, but it is a relevant fact that the “new-new wave” is a wave without a “father figure.”

It is obvious then why the young Romanian directors, like their Central-European predecessors, have huge issues with authority and authority figures.

One level of this conflicting view with authoritative figures is, in the most Foucaultian way, the representation of conflicts with power institutions and the representatives of power. The preoccupation to represent policemen and police force in a depreciative way can be compared, for example, with Wladyslaw Pasikowski's movie *Psy* (1992) where Franz Mauer (Boguslaw Linda) plays the hero of Pigs, a policeman without morals. In the early, post-1989 movies, this ironic transformation of the authority figures is used in a similar way to Milos Forman's movies in the Czech period, where portraying ridiculous and ineffectual authority figures was a reaction to the political system.

Later, in the young Romanian directors' productions appear several defective authority figures, lacking power, and being merely simulacra of their authority. Corneliu Porumboiu's movies illustrate this dynamic; father figures, policemen and managers appear in circumstances that void them of relevance and representativeness. This "emptiness of authority" (A.O Scott, 2008) is less and less political or with social relevance and becomes an ironic treatment of reality with universal value (with less local/ national relevance). This is the case of the doctors who neglect Mr. Lăzărescu, they are a social critique of medical systems everywhere; or the parodic depiction of the local TV station in Vaslui, in Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest*, where the manager-anchor is as void of power and relevance as the entire business, or in the case of the small time authorities in *California Dreamin'* (*California Dreamin'* [Nesfârșit,] 2007, director Cristian Nemescu), assuming stances that make them ridiculous. This treatment is to be understood as a grammatical element in the contemporary Romanian cinema.

8. A Common Aesthetics and a Shared "Art Cinema"

It is obvious that the young directors of the new Romanian cinema perceive themselves as belonging to "art cinema," in the very sense used by the directors during the 60s and the 70s by the French directors. Also, we need to see the shared aesthetic of the "new-new wave" in connection with the discussions around the concept of "film d'art," term first coined as a reaction to the "popular cinema" of the early years. All of the young Romanian directors have clearly stated that their movies do not address the general public and that they are conceiving their works mostly for festival (that is artistic) purposes.

Following the arguments of François Truffaut's essay *Une certaine tendance du cinéma*, dated 1954, there is a *politique des auteurs* in the new Romanian cinema. The *politique* is based on the application in cinema of that what is acceptable in

all the other visual arts (Bazin, 1985), the end product is the expression of the author, and not the simple manifestation of the work itself.

In the same way as the *auteur* theory was built around the idea that studio productions, following the establishment rules, have a negative impact on cinema, and that the individual authors have to become the centre of their own productions, the Romanian directors support the same artistic philosophy. As Cristi Puiu has put it, “a movie is the vision of an author about the world” (quoted in Fulger, 2006), and this view is a clear and straight paraphrase of what Truffaut said a decade ago, that the author and cinema are reflected by the director’s work, against the “entertainment” cinema, defined in its pejorative dimension, merely diverting attention from what is important.

Another aesthetic characteristic of the movies made by the young Romanian directors is their reaction against the “old cinema.” One of the few contemporary critics writing extensively on the subject, Alex Leo Șerban (2009), suggests that this “generation” has no theoretical background, as the French Nouvelle Vague, but it is motivated by the same revolt against the clichés of the old cinema. Here the key discontent of the new generation of directors is against the “metaphorical” cinema of their predecessors, but also of the edulcorated realism of Communism. Cristian Mungiu confirms this reading: “Those movies (*in the old Romanian cinema*, note added) were badly acted, completely unbelievable, with stupid situations, lots of metaphors. It was a time when, you know, saying something about the system was more important than telling a story.” (Quoted by A. O Scott, 2008). Like the French Nouvelle Vague, building up cinema practices against the sclerotic nature of the previously made cinema and against the Hollywood practices, the Romanian new cinema is oriented against what is perceived as a consequence of the previously mainstream Romanian cinema, founded on a false realism and an edulcorated view of the world. This is a stance, comparable again with the French directors, lashing out against the lack of realism and of social relevance of the French “old” cinema. This is now to be found in the criticisms of the young Romanian vanguard and they are all following the same path, that of separating from the traditional (albeit recent) cinema of their predecessors, or dinosaurs as Mungiu calls them (here one example could be Sergiu Nicolaescu with his historical re-enactments designed to support ideologically the Communist regime).

So what is the “grammar” of this “new-new wave” of directors, and how can we describe it?

9. What Kind of Grammar of the Cinema?

This is a long asked question in film studies: does cinema hold a “language” of its own, and if it does, what is the essence of the “grammar” that keeps together this cinematic language? A couple of negative answers would be in order here. First, my understanding of the “grammar” is not semiologic by nature, neither is it a linguistic expression, in the sense that we can analyze it in a sequencing of frames, nor is it a form of literary criticism, expanded in the cinematic universe, interpretable as a “coherent text” (Ballour 2000). If I reject the linguistic approach to cinematographic language it is because I think it is impossible to have a normative dimension for several movies. Neither can a semiotic perspective, in the traditional sense expressed by Umberto Eco, as a general theory of signs, serve the purpose of understanding how the art of several directors is connected. These highly formal approaches to the movie grammar – as is, for example the one proposed by Aron Ping D’Souza, following Mitry’s suggestions, that a cinematographic grammar is formalized in a mathematical structure – are over complicated and end up explaining only the surface and not the deep content.

As for the positive definitions, in order to have a grammar of the cinema, we need to elaborate a code with univocal significance, a code based on the acceptance of a fundamental unit. But what is the fundamental unit? Is it the shot, as was for the early Russian formalists, and thus, by simply combining shots together we obtain a cinematographic “sentence”? Or is it by analyzing larger units, the sequences (a series of shots united in time and space), that we can interpret them as phrases? Or is it those rules or cinematic conventions that form a film grammar that can evolve over time and are in permanent change (Villarejo, 2007)? Other works, like the writings of Marie-Thérèse Journot (2006), try to generate “vocabularies” of cinema, thus giving this “new language” a metalanguage of its own.

I would rather accept the Deleuzean notion that cinema is a “language without a language” (1985), so I would propose a narrative interpretation of cinematic “grammar,” where an interpretation of narrativity specific to the young Romanian moviemakers can show both their appetite for storytelling innovations, for certain camera movements specific to a given aesthetics of cinema and their predisposition for composition. A grammar is, in this respect, a formal recognition of combinations, of rules that make a single significance for a commonly accepted meaning, thus making it a paradigmatic understanding of grammar. In this context, a frame by frame analysis would not provide a grammatical reading, but more of an external depiction of image-facts. I would approach the reading of the new

Romanian directors along the line of reasoning of Alexandre Astruc, whose 1948 article “Camera Stylo” provides the resource for the French New Wave cinema as a language, that is “a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in a contemporary essay or novel. (Quoted in Monaco 1976.)

Thus the first articulation of this kind of “grammar” is not the shot (or the “image-movement”), but it is composed of identifying forms and techniques as they are manifested in the content, and not the other way around.

Another element of identifying the characteristics of this grammar is to be looking for visual structuring; a *cinematic* approach to grammar is fundamentally a depiction of visual organization of the time and the space. For example one major “grammatical” characteristic, common to all the “new-new wave” productions in Romanian contemporary cinema is the preference for verism, the closeness of cinema to realism, that is the importing of documentary style filming, as it happens in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* or *12:08 East of Bucharest*, where the preference for steady camera techniques give the story a strong determination in the objectivity. This predisposition is to be seen in the preference for the long shot as the key method to create intervals for narrativity. “Le plan sequence” is used by the young directors as an instrument for generating a reality that comes out of the visual field and influences the story itself. This again, is followed by a construction of the space in terms of a realist order (following the definition of Bazin), which allows the director to avoid editing and to represent actions as continuous in a continuous space. This long shot disposition coupled with the accentuation of depth of field – used as a punctuation form – generates one of the most important tropes in the structuring of the “new-new wave” grammar.

As was the case of the Italian neo-realism, this new realism of the Romanian young cinema comes against the fictional-propaganda style of the “old” Romanian cinema, founded in a certain symbolic stage, where signification is generated by hidden meaning and collateral or subtle references. This is a direct cinema, in the very sense of addressing direct and abrupt issues, some of them ignored for decades. This is the case not only of Mungiu’s movie (*4 Months...*), who was built around one aspect of social life during communism (illegal abortions), it is a common denominator for most of the young generation – for example Florin Iepan, one of the most significant documentary makers in contemporary Romania, developed several years before Mungiu a nonfiction film around “the generation of the decree,” *Children of the Decree (Decrețarii*, 2005, an entire generation of children born in Romania because of a decree given by Ceaușescu forbidding abortions).

Here the importance of the narrative time has to be stressed, again a grammatical characteristic, since the “new-new wave” of Romanian directors tend to recount their stories in the present time, not just in terms of their contemporary stories, but in terms of a narrativity that is personally lived, even if it is happening in the past (as is the case for *Tales from the Golden Age*).

10. Location, Location, Location

Another key element of this grammatical description of the Romanian contemporary cinematography must include the *mise-en-scène* as interpretative method as being more than the shot composition and the positioning of the camera. Simply put, the staging, the shot is about making content decisions within the whole of the movie. Without ignoring the basic elements of cinematographic language used in the construction of the context (angle distribution, camera’s depth of field, camera movement, shot duration) the grammar of the new Romanian cinema can be described as being based on depicting an universe of the urban proletarians, in the descent of one of the most important European directors, Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose characters are a part of this backdrop not only because of its social significance, but also because of the narrative relevance.

All the directors mentioned here have this one common element, which is the development of the narrative in everyday spaces. The blocks of flats (be it the communist dark vision in *4 months...* and *12:08 East of Bucharest*; or the gloomy apartments in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* or the backyards in *Marilena from P7* (*Marilena de la P7*, 2006, made by Nemescu) are one common denominator for the construction of the story. This desolate urban context and the decrepitude of the space are in radical contradiction with the fantastic and beautiful spaces in spectacular cinema. Using apparently dull environments to contextualize the story development, the young Romanian directors are making not just an aesthetic statement, but also use it as a storytelling device.

Representing space in its disenfranchised aspects, with a close attention to the negative effects of industrialism and the profound alienating nature of the relationship between humans in this kind of world is fundamental, for all the young directors. Porumboiu, for example, both in *12:08 East of Bucharest* and in *Police, Adjective* depicts the moral dilemma of his main character in a background of urban space where people have no connections, where the passers-by are strangers, isolated beings in a world void of content (and ethics). And, at the end of the movie (in *Police, Adjective*), when the main character’s moral degradation

is complete, he draws a stake-out that takes place in a space surrounded by blocks of flats, a symbolic reference to the no-escape situation he (and his victim) is caught into.

Using set design for the development of *mise-en-scène* which, in its turn, is used as a narrative incentive, is a deliberate storytelling decision, based both on the preference for documentary style and on the rejection of built up settings considered to be artificial. In these movies, location shooting and exaggerated forms of authenticity favour genuine spaces as they are considered in a reversed relationship with the interest for intimate construction of character (discussed below). Common places, blocks of flats, streets and non-relevant corners of the urban space are only means of accentuating realism by means of hyperbolic realistic devices.

Why do the new-new directors use this method of authenticating their story? I would suggest that this comes from Andre Bazin's definition of realist cinema. One, there is a desire for continuity and the directors set their images before the spectator by using the long take (most of these films begin with a shot of a relatively long duration, with little or no action going on) and by preferring deep space (by using deep focus) in an effort to give the viewer "reality" itself, and not just a "representation" of reality.

Most of the "new-new wave" movies are based on this logic of continuous reality, and this is not a simple method, a technological expansion of significance, but the profound meaning of the directors' view of the world. Presenting "the real" is a grammatical function for the young Romanian filmmakers.

11. Telling "Our Stories" in "Our Own Way" – For a "Grammar" of Story Development

As suggested above, the existence of a "new-new wave" of directors is dependent on the development of another narrativity, a narrativity that is European in its foundation because it is rejecting action movie, the spectacle oriented productions and a form of epic based on a very strict causality. Here we can find one major difference of storytelling between the two forms of cinema (European and American), suggested by David Bordwell and other formalist critics of cinema (Bordwell, 2005). The influential work of Bordwell, dealing with narration in the fiction film, describes Hollywood cinema as dominated by character-centred causality, founded on a question-and-answer logic, on problem solving routines, deadline structures for the plot, and a mutual cueing system of word, sound and image are seen as typical for Hollywood films. Against this conceptual framework

the European cinema is described as being founded on de-centred plots, having indirect and psychological motivation and “parametric” forms of narration.

These characteristics are easily identifiable in the types of narratives put into action by the young Romanian directors. The way they tell their stories is so much similar to each other in their dissimilitude toward “American” cinema that the theoretical connections are almost inevitable.

Cristian Nemescu, considered by some the most vibrant director of the “new-new wave” (he regrettably died in a car accident caused, the irony of fate, by an off duty American soldier), has built his unfinished movie, *California Dreamin’* (2007) around the opposition between these two world views. On the one hand we have the Romanians in the remote village, who encounter a NATO train loaded with American soldiers (Armand Assante being Captain Jones, the leading officer of the group). On the other hand we have the constant references to the “Americans” as cultural icons, and the local reality which is totally remote from any mythological consistence.

In this approach to narrative, meaning is not determined by action, as is the case in the classical (read American) cinema, instead it is based on the construction of the character’s psychological convolution. As it is the case in *Police, Adjective*, the main hero is described in the actions of an anti-heroic figure. Although he is a policeman, his police work ethics and practices are based on procrastination (while he is a constant reversed figure of an action hero policeman) and on delaying decision making or action taking.

The diegesis of the perspective is important for the young Romanian directors, since the point of view and the changes (or lack of change) become elements of narrative. One of the most important methods used is a non diegetic introduction, one that delays the introduction of any form of action, and this postponement of the climax – which comes against the “classical” narrativity in Hollywood screenwriting – makes way for the involvement of the viewer into the psyche of the character.

Again, in *Police, Adjective*, there is a police story which is told in a clear negative reference to American police movies, where the investigation, the collection of evidence and the development of the case are retold in a non-traditional manner. Focusing on the drama of the character and not on his actions, most of the actions of the key character are trivial, like, for example, in the climactic moment of his police work, the officer eats a bowl of soup all by himself, in a frame that takes a long time, allowing the viewer to enter into the inner world of the character. Halting action in favour of internal resolution and deconstructing

diegetic dynamics for emotions and psychological build up of tension, without dramatical interventions.

This places the Romanian cinema within the boundaries of mock-realism tropes of the Eastern-Europe cinema (Eidsvik 1991), with roots in Chekhov's literature, and in Caragiale's theatre, where everyday life becomes a source for comedy.

12. Theatrical Displays and the Crossing of the "Fourth Wall"

Keeping the unity of time and space and breaking the "fourth wall" is a constant interest for the "new-new wave" directors. Most of the films that belong to the new generation of directors take place during one day and one night, and the unity of time and space is similar in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, *12:08 East of Bucharest*, and *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*. Not only do all these movies take place within a very narrow margin of time, but they have a built-in conflict and contradiction between realism and theatrical representation and this is suggestively expressed by the ending in *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, where the main characters (Otilia and Găbița), after their ordeal, are having a meal in a restaurant (with its symbolic relevance attached – since meat eating and abortion are connected in their gruesome reality). This is the moment when Otilia turns towards the camera and stares directly into the eyes of the viewers, establishing an emotional link that crosses the screen.

Another common method used in several of these movies is the theatrical display of the characters in front of the camera. This is the case with the dinner table in *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, where the presentation of the main character, as a solitary member at the table, while everybody around her is talking about trivial things builds up tension and the connection between the character and the spectator. Much more, the setting is a reference to the *Last Supper* of da Vinci, the suffering figure in the centre being replaced by the feminine character tormented by a difficult moral decision.

This iconographic reference is a constant trait for the "new-new wave" directors. One of the most explicit use of this method of imaginary symbolism, where the link between theatrical development and religious imaginary re-enactment is straight, we can find in Porumboiu's movies. Both *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *Police, Adjective* used the triptych as a cinematographic device. Porumboiu is building his final frames with a direct reference to Andrei Rublev's triptych. Both movies (*12:08 East of Bucharest* and *Police, Adjective*) are centred

on key scenes which are built around three characters, in an obvious transformation of the religious Trinity in a reversed, mundane “trinity.” The referencing to the Eastern Orthodox tradition of icon painting and its following imaginary structures, founded in a European Christian context, makes the Romanian cinema a particular voice in the series of new waves. Three figures (be it at the television debate or in the office of the police head), are frontally looking at the viewer, with their physical disposition similar to a deeply Orthodox tradition of image construction, while their behaviour in critical reverse. The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit are represented in degraded values, in order to make the debasement of humanity even more abrupt.

13. The Individual at the Centre of the Narrative

Starting with Elasesser’s (2005) remark that in the European cinema the personal space is cultivated as a narrative, we can observe that the characters and their moral dilemmas, elements on which Bordwell also founded his description of the modern cinema, are fundamental to the new Romanian cinema. The concentration on the character’s evolution or even more specifically on the effort to develop the character’s “human condition” is the key to understanding the grammar of European film and, by consequence, of the new Romanian directors.

If within the European cinema there are waves of new-waves, the Romanian young directors obviously form another “new-new wave,” maybe the last of the new-waves. While these waves can be defined by their festival success (as was for most of the Central European films, like the Oscar-winning *Kolya* by Jan Svěrák, Czech Republic, 1996), by their relevance in the European cultural dialogue (as was the case of Almodóvar’s early productions), or by their shared language and cinematic methods (as it is for the new Romanian directors), the recent developments in contemporary cinema are strongly connected both to the European cultural background and to national identity.

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