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Charts and paradigms

Alex. Leo Şerban



When they tried to establish a chart of the Romanian movie from its beginnings up to the present day, the journalists interested in this subject- and who obviously believed it would have been an interesting subject for the public!- had to face two obstacles which apparently had nothing to do with each other. No, it isn't (only) about the low appetite of some of those questioned to undertake a 'test' which uncovers them either due to their verdicts and idiosyncrasies- or, bluntly, due to their inconsistency and inherent 'friendships'...

One deals with the frailty of the canon regarding the seventh art: how many of our critics (who aren't just chroniclers!) have seriously bothered their head discussing this canon- given the fact that the Romanian cinematography keeps on being the Cinderella of the arts, exercising a quasi-null influence on the cultural paradigm, blocked in the literature-music-painting 'royal triad'? In Romania, due to too many reasons in order to be analysed here, the cinema is *not* part of the compulsory cultural canon. And maybe it is not just mere happening that the only cinema men valorised by the afore-mentioned paradigm are *not only* film but, more importantly, theatre directors: Liviu Ciulei and Lucian Pintilie. With

us, the 'big' film battles have been given on journalistic ground, being punctual and mainly connected to the financial frauds of the CNC¹ juries. The only critic who initiated a salutary work of re-establishing the position of the cannon- that of yesterday and that of today- is Valerian Sava and his *Critical History of the Contemporary Romanian Movie* (Meridiane Publishing House, 1999) whose first published volume stops immediately after 'the obsessing decade'... But Mister Sava is a concealed, marginalized, isolated or simply ignored 'franc-tireur': if the discussion of the canon is difficult in what regards literature, then, when coming to the cinema, it is simply accidental!

The second obstacle deals with the too recent moment (approximately four or five years) when I was the witness of the outburst and settling of a potential 'new Romanian cinema' created by the young generation (from Cristi Puiu to Cristi Mungiu). Even if, let's say, some of the best Romanian movies of all times (Pintilie's *The Oak*, Nae Caranfil's *E Pericoloso Sporgersi* or Danieliuc's *The Conjugal Bed*) were produced in the recent years after the Revolution, only Danieliuc's movie managed to be a debut which indeed brought something new; the other two did noth-

¹ The National Council of Cinematography.

ing else but to vividly and freely further on pursue important filmographies. Under the given circumstances, I don't think one can speak of a 'renewal' of the Romanian cinema before the substantial series initiated by Puiu's *Stuff and Dough*, recently followed by Caranfil's *Philanthropy*, Mungiu's *Occident*, Radu Muntean's *The Rage*, Titus Muntean's *Exam* and now *The Death of Mister Lăzărescu* directed by the same Puiu... All these titles (not at all equal in value, but having something in common) successively appeared during the same year or quite recently one after the other, creating the impression of a conjoined revival movement (thematic and formal) and of a re-evaluation of the native cinematographic tropisms.

Now, leaving aside these considerations which are more connected to the history of the art under discussion, one must say that beyond hierarchies and canons- the new thing that the cinema after 1994 has really brought about has obviously been the thematic freedom. The directors were finally free to turn their own stories into movies, to screen the books they liked the way they pleased or to do both, intermingling personal obsessions with suggestions from literature. The strong word here is 'personal'. Because, otherwise, of course, the directors of the communist regime *also* mixed literary suggestions with their own ideas- only that none of them was one hundred per cent 'personal', but filtered through the alienated filter of censorship. And censorship had a right of 'final cut'- as, ironically, the producers from the big American studios have always had. The communist censorship used to cut off the too transparent hints or the 'inconvenient' subjects and was indifferent to the commercial impact of the movie- anyway, except for the historical or detective movies directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu or for the improvised shows signed by Mircea Drăgan or Geo Saizescu, one couldn't talk of 'commercial success' in Ceaușescu's Romania... Obviously, 'the capitalist censorship' was mainly interested in the profit: if a movie contains things susceptible

of sending the average viewer away (from the subject to the direction), that film is 'readjusted' till it fits the standard format.

The paradox is that the big problem of the Romanian movie before '89 was the existence of censorship and the great problem of the post-December Romanian movie is the lack of censorship! The cinema has managed to get rid of the ideological censorship but I think that some commercial censorship would do it no harm. It is obviously not the case of the author movies but that of the commercial movies: in the case of the former, the censorship coming from the public is very effective... Used to the non-problematic movies and craving for easy entertainment (all the more as various televisions have inoculated it *this* type of fraud!), the Romanian public is not yet (and I am moderating my language!) doing justice to the offers coming from the authentic cinema men. We are faced with, as the Americans state it in movies, 'a situation', because an 'authentic cinema man' doesn't lend himself to 'paying services' to the population, the mediocre directors who could have served the public have vanished and the average spectator is waiting to see detective movies and comedies; hence, there is a fatal syncopation between supply and demand. An authentic cinema man- as opposed to a standardized craftsman- wants to express *himself* or to express Reality or both, while the great public- as I said- is not interested in 'Reality' but in entertainment. And when this public cannot find it in the cinema, it remains indoors, with the TVs on. Sleeping slaves of automatism.

Yet, the Reality (a very difficult to grasp, but still operational concept) keeps on being- especially now, half a century after its amputation from cinemas and television- the only serious motivation for a young director to take up movies. The movie *is*, by definition, Reality (that is Truth) for 24 photograms per second. And what the documentary-as cinematographic manifestation- again by definition, used to do, has been recently claimed by the action movies. The full-length films of the last period of time (the

one I mentioned at the beginning) also presuppose taking possession of this vast and damaged territory called 'Reality'. Circumstantial or not, the moment the documentaries signed by young directors try to save 'the white spots' of the more or less recent history (see Iepan's *The Decree Children* or Solomon's *The Great Communist Plunder*), the full-length films signed by their peers nervously focus on the today 'reality', revealing the meanings of the moment. Moreover: there is a fertile hybridisation exercised by the documentary over fiction (like in *The Death of Mister Lăzărescu*) or, symmetrically, exercised by fiction over the documentary (like in Thomas Ciulei's *That's the Way Things Are*). It doesn't matter that we didn't yet reach a 'fluid border' between fiction and documentary, there are signs that at least in what regards some cinema men- the strict delineations between genres and species have turned futile and at the same time

inoperative for the critics... What eventually matters is a huge- and undoubtedly unpremeditated- recovering effort of the anthropological dimension: *all* Romanian movies after 1990- no matter the quality!- represent a devoted mirror of the human mutations (sociological and of any other kind) that the Romanian society has undergone during the past fifteen years. From this perspective, the value of the cinema productions comes second to the interests an anthropologist can take in any of the titles appeared after 1990! Yet, as my competence cannot reach any further, I shall only hope that such a subject is exciting enough so as to be granted a serious study. Anyway, it would be a salutary sign that at least in this area, the cumbersome cultural paradigm which focuses on literature so and so forth is- beneficently- put aside...

Translated by Raluca Vîjîiac