

ROMANIA AS THE NEW BARBARIC PERIPHERY OF EUROPE IN LUCIAN PINTILIE'S POST-1990 FILMS*

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Abstract: *The fall of the Ceausescu regime found Romania in a state of poverty and isolation from the West, a condition generated by the communist government's social, economic, and cultural policies. With newly gained artistic freedom, local filmmakers rapidly tackled the issue of Europeanization and of the Romanians' place in the European project, as part of the endemic anti-communist discourse after 1990. Along with Mircea Daneliuc and Dan Pița, Lucian Pintilie's works illustrated the tensions between the real Romania and the West, rendering a more pessimistic image on Romanians as the new European barbarians – an image strongly contrasting with the one that the communist regime had obsessively engineered in the earlier decades. His 1996 statement "Romania is an orangutan preserve" shocked the journalists and critics who attended the press-conference that launched his mining thriller "Too Late", but encompasses optimally his view on the Romania's striking liminality [that] he pictures best in "An Unforgettable Summer", and also approaches in "The Oak", and "Next Stop Paradise". We are focusing on how Pintilie worked out this new miserabilist brutality and how it reshaped former views on national identity; we also ask whether his films are a pure reflection of disappointment with the young democracy after 1990¹.*

Keywords: Lucian Pintilie, space, cinema, periphery, Europeanization.

For the famous Romanian film and theatre director Lucian Pintilie, the fall of the Ceausescu regime became a defining milestone. In 1990, he ended his "royal exile", as he himself called the almost 20 years of being forced to live and work abroad as a result to the harsh censorship of his previous projects by the communist authorities: his

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1968 masterpiece “The Re-enactment”, his 1972 stage adaptation of “The Government Inspector”, and his 1981 film adaptation of I.L. Caragiale “Carnival Scenes”².

Hopeful that real political change would follow, soon after the 1989 Revolution, Pintilie also became the head of the new governmental institution that the Ministry of Culture created for local film production sector, and, in this quality, he had a major impact on the reform of the Romanian filmmaking industry and on the launching of a new generation of directors and screen writers that later on became the foundation of what we now call The Romanian New Wave.

But the events and transformations in post-communist Romania, culminating with the brutal suppression of the pro-democratic gatherings in the Universitatii Square in June 1990, overturned his optimism. As described in his works and public statements, the post-socialist Romanian democracy had been seized by a neo-communist government, and real change towards new European values was at risk. The same attitude was expressed by his colleagues Mircea Daneliuc, Dan Pița or Stere Gulea, who stressed the necessity of an urgent anti-communist discourse after 1990.

For Lucian Pintilie, this culminated with the radical conclusion that accompanied his 1990 mining thriller “Too Late”: “Romania is just an orangutan preserve”. Actually, the line is also expanded in the film by the main character, the hard-boiled prosecutor Dumitru Costa, who investigates several deaths at a mining facility in Valea Jiului: “a preserve for orangutans ready to be programmed on demand”, an “infernal space” inhabited by subjects of a cynically conducted degeneracy experiment. As depicted here, Romania in the “90s is this forgotten place where Europe ends and European values are mocked rather than accepted. As one of the characters” sour jokes: “Haven’t you heard of the human rights? They talked about it on Channel 2”³.

Romania: where Europe ends

Depicting Romania as the periphery of Europe and Western civilization is actually one of the main themes of Lucian Pintilie’s post-1990 films, a theme that also can be traced back to his previous work (mainly “Carnival Scenes”), and throughout his later productions (“An Unforgettable Summer” and “Next Stop Paradise”).

Contrasting with the previous films that dealt with national identity and were launched in the communist period (especially those that described local historical events and personalities), which vouched for a flattering self-image, Pintilie’s perspective is far less favourable. The film director unambiguously confronts the worn-

² “Carnival Scenes” was showed on screen just after the fall of the communist regime, because of the censorship process of the previous government institutions.

³ Channel 2 (TVR2) was a secondary and less watched programme of The Romanian Television.

off epitome “Romania was always an outpost of civilization surrounded by barbarians” with visceral depictions of old and new local brutality, kept on by frustration, ethnic and class conflicts, and abuse.

Pintilie's Romania is a space that always looked up to its Western counterparts, but at the same time inarticulate in following the path for change, and outrageously self-indulgent. We see this in “The Oak”, where doctors read “Paris Match” but are complacent in fatalistic attitudes towards the system; in “An Unforgettable Summer” where the bourgeoisie spoils in pompous parties while putting into play the most vulgar and rude practices; or in “Next Stop Paradise” and “Too Late”, where the American dream sinks in the local kitsch and ignorance.

This blazing disproportion that controls Pintilie's characters is favoured by his choice of metonymically functioning settings. Romania as periphery emerges from his use of space. From the filthy outskirts of Bucharest (“The Oak”, “Next Stop Paradise”) or remote industrial cities (“The Oak”, “Too Late”), to secluded rural homes (“The Afternoon of a Torturer”) or the western-like deserted South-Eastern Romania, the director projects his distinct view on the local landscape that becomes an immense prison with invisible bars. Many of his main or episodic characters dream or try to escape this unregulated place, but tragically or comically, they fail.

As Anna Batori concludes in her comparative study of the use of space in Romanian and Hungarian cinema, the local films of the transition surpass the previous metaphorical role of the setting in the socialist productions, but stress the “decaying spatial set of the locations that refer to the gloomy post-socialist period”⁴.

Moreover, at least four of Pintilie's post-1990 films address the core/centre – periphery/outskirts tensions that are a clean-cut reaction to the physical and symbolic distance between the two. A careful analysis reveals two such competing relations. The capital/large city as the place of government and institutions vs. the rural areas or small towns, where law and order are displaced (and where most of the filmic events take place), and the Western world opposed to socialist and post-socialist Romania. The characters are frequently caught in this double-periphery that intensifies their hopelessness and makes way for the director's tragicomic style. Like Hungarian writer Noémi Kiss noted in one of her very articles on the marginalisation of Eastern Europe: “The eastern, or Eastern European, region wallows in an uncritical assumption of western mentality, trapped by the demand to *adapt* to the west”⁵.

⁴ Anna Batori, *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema*, London, Palgrave, 2018, p. 198.

⁵ Noémi Kiss, *Centre and Periphery in the Cultural Europe*, “Medium.com”, February 25, 2019 (<https://medium.com/asoulforeurope/centre-and-periphery-in-the-cultural-europe-3ea436bd08c7>). Consultat la 20.08.2020.

Perhaps the most striking occurrence of the West-East tension in Lucian Pintilie's films is generated by the cultural collision of artistic products (especially music) that belong to either of the signified spaces. In "The Oak", the main protagonist's Walkman plays French music while several shots later, in the train she travels, the director stages an accordion performance of eroticized local folk songs. Even more obvious, the same strategy is used in "Too Late", as a string quartet of young musicians go from Bucharest to the mining platform to play for the workers who usually indulge in the more Oriental tunes played at the local bar. Their musicians' performance is rapidly disrupted by the workers who start to fight over some stolen spoons, but for some seconds the ridiculous fight and Schubert co-exist on screen, pointing to the absurd displacement of the latter.

In spite of these transparent contrasts, Pintilie should not be mistaken for some naïve Euro-optimist; instead, he is a reflexive moderate Eurosceptic "forged" in the time spent abroad. And this is best shown in his post-1990 films and a short recounting of the failed pitch for his "Jerusalem" project. Because the story was also dealing with the uncomfortable issue of paedophilia, it was never financed by European producers, despite the film director's reputation at the time.

*"The affable arguments of the tolerant [producer] and the ones of communist censorship are like two peas in a pod. The warm-hearted censor was the great grotesque encounter of my socialist artist experience, the tolerant of that space and time"*⁶.

This mild Euroscepticism is doubled by the harsh diagnostic of Romanian transition: most of his characters are unprepared for real European integration, even though his central characters show both the ability and willingness to fight for change.

If, in the previous examples, Europe becomes a lost chance for most characters appearing on screen and inhabiting the same space as the protagonists, new conflicts arise when depicting the American influence over the small Romanian culture, conflicts that hold key-positions in "Next Stop Paradise" and "Niki and Flo". The American phantasies of the former generation and the post-1990 geo-political changes gave way to a society focused on consumption of imported goods. Nela's father ("The Oak") "travels" from his death bed which was packed with Lenin's books in a Marlboro-printed plastic bag, and his ashes are finally scattered from a Nescafé coffee jar. In "Too Late" the camera catches a glimpse of prosecutor Costa's belongings: Amigo Coffee, cheap Denim aftershave, and Aquafresh toothpaste. Later, while the man is channel hopping on the TV, a fast Adidas commercial pops up, signalling a definitive transformation of local economy.

⁶ Lucian Pintilie, *Bricabrac*, București, Edit. Humanitas, 2003, p. 473.

But the American dream becomes a more prominent plot element in his two later works, "Next Stop Paradise" and "Niki and Flo", where leaving or wishing to leave for the United States generates strong antagonism, going beyond the frequent dark humour of the director. For instance, after Niki Ardelean's only son dies while trying to change a faulty fuse, the father-in-law of his daughter, who advocates for the young couple's leaving to the US, inappropriately comments, during the commemoration ceremony, "You'll never see a fuse like this in America!". In these films, the United States become the new core that attracts Romanians with centripetal force, even with more magnitude than Germany, the main migration interest for Romanians at the beginning of the 1990s.

In all the films already discussed, Pintilie succeeds to point, more or less directly, to major changes and challenges in the way Romania re-positioned itself after the fall of the communist regime, outlining their deep impact in the shortcomings of transition.

Notes On a Barbaric Carnival

For Pintilie, this upside-down world, where truth, virtue and beauty lose their value and are constantly disrupted by violence and vulgarity, is the image of a perpetual carnival, like the one Bakhtin was discovering in the literary works of Rabelais⁷. "New and deeply humane relations"⁸ are expected to resurface after the carnival ended, and, through his work, the artist tries to unmask and to castigate abnormal realities. Nevertheless, the strong line he uses to link the abnormal and the real becomes disquieting as the natural absurdity associated with carnival scenes is doubled and even undermined by profound tragedy.

"In both theatre and film, and even in my opera work, I cohabited with the monstrous for a long time. I put in the time to uncloak it, because, very frequently, it takes the deceiving forms of everyday life, and even humour. Whoever is familiarized with my films already knows that I exorcise the monstrous by practicing a certain type of catharsis, by some kind of comic «spell»"⁹.

There is a constant end-of-the-world feeling in Lucian Pintilie's artistic expression and it is moulded in the texture of the "real world": abandoned bridges, dirty outskirts shot in an almost documentary style, grey buildings, filthy bars and restaurants, suffocating barracks, or noisy brothels. The world and the characters populating it are equally corrupted. Moral atrocity becomes the natural companion of

⁷ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

⁸ Lucian Pintilie, *op.cit.*, p. 14-22.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 478.

physical destruction. The only hope comes from his main characters, who are seen as dangerous or frightening by everyone around because of their strong moral codes and willingness to fight evil and corruption. Therefore, all those surrounding them try to destroy them, to drag them back in the muddy waters everyone else is enjoying. But for Pintilie, any attempt to “converse, negotiate, or chat with Evil” is a path to “moral alteration”¹⁰, so his heroes and heroines would rather burn all bridges than find common safe places with the others.

In his films, the physical space reflects the moral and ethical traits of the characters, and the camerawork will constantly insist on this morbid ambivalence strongly contrasting with the vitality of the main characters. Lucian Pintilie’s films depict un-romanticized transformations of the Romanian physical and socio-political space. It all starts from the flooded cesspool that opens “Carnival Scenes”, from where the most intimate and tragicomic desires of Caragiale’s characters emerge.

“An Unforgettable Summer” brings to the fore another contrasting world, where the elegant Vorvoreanu mansion faces the local brothel hosted in “Marea Unire” (“Unification Day”) Hotel. The ballroom seems utterly misplaced, like an expensive mirror on an adobe wall or like playing Mozart amidst the cruellest ethnic repression. Andrei Gorzo marked that Pintilie intentionally goes against the grain in representing the past (here inter-war Romania), avoiding plain nostalgia, and approaching it with a distinct anti-sentimentality¹¹.

This same image is expanded in “The Oak”, where poverty and baseness dominate each frame. In Nela’s apartment, the “bathroom plus kitchen” room is awfully claustrophobic, in the doctor’s office flowers wither, the train compartments are filthy and packed with workers, the mining city is covered in coal dust, and at the local hospital the bodies are stacked on the cold cement floor. This grim space becomes grotesque when it is “embellished” by Schubert’s music or tropical wallpapers like in “Too Late”. As the director asks himself:

*“(…) what remains of a community, of a human being, when they try to adapt to the Apocalypse – and by that conferring it a normality status –, when the catastrophic element becomes trivial, and ordinary? And especially when all the riff-raff – as the shared irresponsibility, the grim humour we, the Romanians, are so proud of – ceases to be an inscrutable defence?”*¹².

When the actual space does not physically transform characters (like the skinny, hungry, and coal-blackened figure emerging from the shaft at the end of “Too Late”), Pintilie puts into play temporary masks that point to the final downfall of his

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 431.

¹¹ Andrei Gorzo, *O vară de neuitat. Un studiu critic*, f. n., Edit. Liter Net, 2017, p. 26.

¹² Lucian Pintilie, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

protagonists. Niki Ardelean faces the brutal revelation that his only daughter has been completely emotionally “abducted” by her father-in-law while being forced to put on Mickey Mouse ears on top of his colonel uniform. In “Next Stop Paradise”, Mitu’s brother comes back from the United States wearing a ridiculous feather headpiece (vulgarly mimicking native American costume), while the girls at the party painted their faces in the colours of the Romanian, respectively American flag. But the most distinct element is the painted short moustache of the one wearing the Romanian flag, an ambivalent, equally comic and tragic sign, both Chaplin and Hitler. Thus, Romania as an upside-down world breeds upside-down citizens, or functions as an indiscriminate poison.

At the other end of the line, Pintilie attacks the Evil and the Perverse that try to dress up and act like human and ordinary. In his artistic universe, there is an ongoing concealment of identity, making the protagonists to deal not with Reality but with “jokes, dreams, accidents, mistakes, misunderstandings, illusions, staged plays, and so on”¹³

Man can become evil and dress himself up as Man afterwards, forcing others to see just a remote, peripheral part of his identity, seemingly disconnected from his true self. Nevertheless, these carnivalesque characters are destroyed by their own human essence: communist prosecutors are torn with melancholy and remorse, torturers are regressing to child-state, the communist strong arms get the jitters. In this way, evil is suppressed by its obvious ridiculous being.

Nevertheless, the real threat is when it succeeds to corrupt the most intimate relations, when the paroxysmal state of the ongoing carnival becomes nightmarish: Nela being hunted by her sister in “The Oak”, or Franț Țandără attacked by his son when he wants to testify for torturing and killing political prisoners on command (“The Afternoon of a Torturer”).

But there is a silver lining in the Pintilie’s humanist perspective. Ignorance, violence, madness, powerlessness, treachery, intolerance are not imprinted in the “Romanian DNA” but they are just side effects of being born and living in a toxic environment, in the “orangutan preserve”, even if some characters express a more pessimistic attitude:

Policeman: “*Sir, these two brothers were originally shepherds... some barbarians*”.

Prosecutor Costa: “*We’re all shepherds. Don’t you remember? «Near a low foothill / At Heaven’s doorsill...»*”¹⁴ (“Too Late”).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

¹⁴ Here, prosecutor Dumitru Costa is quoting the first two verses of the highly regarded Romanian pastoral ballad “Miorița” (“The Little Ewe”).

The downfall is that the side effects prove permanent, due to long exposure. “Decontamination” seems impossible for all his characters who succeed to escape the preserve. They fail to evolve and are stuck in a state of under-humans, of new barbarians or outcasts.

The two sequences that open and close the desperate cry of Pintilie in “Too Late” back his major thesis on the Romanians’ disturbing barbarity in the European context. The film starts with the image of a poorly dressed young woman who plays the cello. We do not see her face, as it is covered by her long dark hair. In the next shot, a tall man descends the escalator, thus establishing the place of the performance: a subway station. The setting is immediately more clearly defined: a subway station in Germany, in 1996. As the man gets closer to the platform, we see that the girl is playing for money, and the man’s overcoat is dirty.

The final scene tries to clarify the identity of the unknown characters shown in the beginning. The girl is Gilda, the aspiring young musician who managed to escape from the mining platform where she had been sent to play Schubert for ignorant workers, and the man is one of the twins (Fișt and Ferzațiu – whose names translate as Left and Right) who roams through Europe with a five kilograms of trotyl in his backpack, looking for his lost brother, and preparing an imminent tragedy. A ghost who escaped the mental hospital that, in Pintilie’s film, is just another synecdoche for post-socialist Romania.

Conclusions

By space and characters, Lucian Pintilie’s films capture the multiple crises of Romania in the transition period, derived by the failed politics of pre- and post-1990 governments, which drove and kept the country in a mediocre periphery of Europe. A large ghetto, as Vasile Ernu writes, which eventually led to a huge gap between those seen as “evil parasites, uncivilized and inefficient” and those described as “good and honest citizens, both civilized and efficient”¹⁵.

But the director interweaves the nostalgia for Europe with a biting disillusion with Romania, even though he shows clear sympathy for the heroes trapped in this no man’s land. His barbaric characters are deeply reprehensible and pitiful, as they appear as products of the space in which they dwell.

¹⁵ Vasile Ernu, *Eastern Europe as a periphery: the case study of Romania*, “Criticatac.ro”, June 6, 2013 (<https://www.criticatac.ro/lefeast/eastern-europe-as-a-periphery-the-case-of-romania/>). Consultat la 10.09.2020.

Nevertheless, the director does not show sympathy for the devil. The only chance for evolution is to resist involution. The only chance for Europeanization is to evade not the physical peripheric space, but the moral one.

