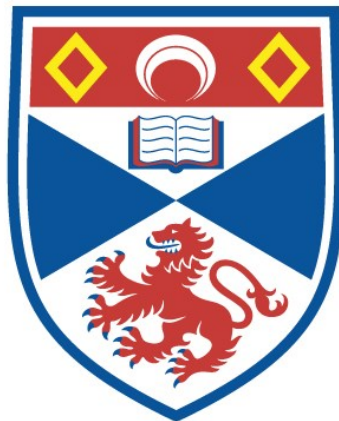


# **"Can Michael the Brave love, or not?" Sex and sexuality in Romanian film culture**

Andrei Mihai Gadalean

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to trace a history of the representations of sex and sexuality in the Romanian film culture, specifically in relation to the various political, social, and economic factors that have shaped these representations. The assertion of this thesis is that, within the Romanian film culture, there is a continuity evident over the course of the last century, which takes the form of a tension between an impulse to showcase sexuality in an honest, liberated manner, and, opposing it, a systematic compulsion to conceal matters related to sexuality, due to both a tradition of repressed morality, and to an assortment of political and ideological repressive mechanisms.

One of the aims of this thesis is to introduce more complex ways of understanding visibility and representation in cinema, beyond the confines of a profit-driven global film culture, therefore the study moves both on a national, and a transnational level. On the one hand, it explores the ways in which sexuality as represented in Romanian films could nuance the discussion concerning sexuality in the cinema. On the other, it looks at how sexuality as represented in other film cultures has travelled to, and has been received within, the specific Romanian context. While a national framework can be seen as limiting, it is also aimed to focus the discussion, and to establish a scope of concrete evidence to illustrate how the specificity of the context constructs specific ways in which sexuality is represented and interacted with at a cinematic level. In Dagmar Herzog's words, "the nation-state is a logical unit to analyse when we are trying to understand changes in laws and government policies; and for most of the twentieth century, it is striking how profound an impact laws have had in shaping national and local sexual cultures and individuals' self-conceptions alike, as well as – for instance, in



the case of restrictions on contraceptive products – the actual bodily experiences of sex”<sup>1</sup>.

The analysis is divided into three main sections. The first focusses on the period between the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the Second World War, looking at the ways in which the Romanian film culture has communicated with the wider, American and European one, in terms of regulating film sexuality. The middle section moves to investigate how the mutations brought by state socialism in terms of ideology and morality have impacted on the visibility of film sexuality, which has been reduced to the point of sublimation. The final section explores the post-communist period, and the ways in which cinema, in the Romanian film culture, has used sex and sexuality to both reckon with a traumatic past, and alleviate traumas of the present.

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<sup>1</sup> Herzog, Dagmar. “Syncopated Sex. Transforming European Sexual Cultures”. In *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, no. 5 (2009), 1298.

## **General acknowledgements**

This project would not have come to fruition had it not been for the unabated encouragement and the relentless faith of my supervisor, Prof. Dina Iordanova. Her intellectual alertness, her knowledgeable optimism, and her pedagogical generosity have been a galvanizing and everlasting inspiration.

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I am thankful to James Mavor, for having helped facilitate this project in the first place, and to Prof. Miruna Runcan, for the same thing, and much more.

To my sister in arms, Sanghita Sen, who has generously welcomed me into her house and into her heart, I can only say: thank you and I love you.

And, because one can't separate one's work from one's life, to all those that I love more than anything and everything –

Andra, my sister-sister, and Carla and Lehel, who have shown unbridled enthusiasm in

cheering me on;

Mum and dad, whose boundless faith in me, and patience with me, and love for me,

humble me;

And Gareth, apple of my eye, who has revealed me to myself –

This is you. I am you.

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*Modern societies have a covert emotional history, yet to be fully drawn into the open.*

(Anthony Giddens)





# **FRAMEWORK OF STUDY**

# Chapter I: Introduction

## I.1. Aims and Research Question

In the spring of 1968, at a meeting between Romanian filmmakers and the head of state, Nicolae Ceausescu, film director Sergiu Nicolaescu explained to Ceausescu that, in order to increase the audience numbers for his epic film *Michael the Brave / Mihai Viteazul* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, Romania / France / Italy, 1971), he had thought about introducing a few love scenes, meant to appeal to audiences abroad. “Can Michael the Brave love, or not?” Nicolaescu asked the communist leader. Ceausescu's reply (not wholly grammatically correct) translates as follows: “I agree that Michael the Brave also made love, but we must know what to depict, comrades! (...) We should depict his love, but only if it played a dominant role in his activity. If it's just something incidental, we should treat it incidentally”<sup>1</sup>.

But what is dominant, and what is incidental, when it comes to representing love, or romance, or sex and sexuality on screen? Who establishes when sexuality plays a dominant role in the “activity” of film characters? How is this different to the incidental? Subsequently, who decides what treating it incidentally means, versus treating it “dominantly”? Is it possible that the introduction of this dichotomy acts as building a “site for the contestation of meaning” for sex and sexuality, in a similar way to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued happens with secrecy vs disclosure, and private

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<sup>1</sup>Betea, Lavinia. “Dialog despre dragoste intre Sergiu Nicolaescu si Nicolae Ceausescu”. [http://adevarul.ro/cultura/istorie/dialog-despre-dragoste-sergiu-nicolaescu-sinicolae-ceausescu-1\\_5146116600f5182b851d425e/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/cultura/istorie/dialog-despre-dragoste-sergiu-nicolaescu-sinicolae-ceausescu-1_5146116600f5182b851d425e/index.html). March, 17, 2013.

vs public<sup>2</sup>?

In these changing and testing times, when news can be real or fake, and when facts weigh less than beliefs, an *aide-memoire* – which this project intends to be – becomes both necessary and important. Authoritarianism, spreading across the globe and strengthening day by day, not only distorts the factual present, but rewrites history. It also proclaims a unifying majoritarian truth, to the detriment (and the oppression) of minorities, whether on the basis of race, gender, or sexuality. But there is nothing new here. These things have happened before, in various times and various contexts. Therefore, to understand how to deal with the present, and to be able to counteract power systems damaging to individuals, understanding exactly *how* these things happened in the past becomes crucial.

But why sexuality? In times of growing social anxieties, why does understanding the ways in which sexuality is shaped and manipulated become so important? Gayle S. Rubin has put it very simply: “it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality”<sup>3</sup>. In other words, conflicts over erotic conduct acquire “symbolic weight”, and “often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties”. Redefining the parameters of sex and sexuality, including in arbitrary terms such as “dominant” or “incidental”, is no more than a mechanism of oppression.

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<sup>2</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Rubin, Gayle S., “Thinking Sex. Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”. In *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, edited by Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton. Routledge: Abingdon, OX, 2007 [1984], 143,

The episode above highlights one aspect of the restrictions that artists in general, and filmmakers in particular, were confronted with during the era of state socialism in Romania. The leader of the ruling party having to give notes (and permission) to a film director to allow his characters a love scene or two is proof not just of the economic dependence that the film industry has had on the state's financial support (the state having acted as producer both during the state socialism, and after, as it has in many European countries), but also of an ideological subordination, specific to countries in the Eastern bloc during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The two and a half decades since the fall of Communism have meant a period of drastic changes for these countries in general, and for Romania in particular. The transition from a totalitarian regime to a functioning democracy, from a centralised economy to a free market, from widespread censorship to freedom of speech has not been a smooth journey for a country which, from a distance (be that geographical, mental, or affective) still looks it's trying to find its own identity.

Perhaps the most crucial changes have been those affecting mentalities, people's thought patterns, their ways of relating to themselves, to one another and to the world. Suppressed and repressed for decades by either archaic traditions, by the Christian Orthodox Church, or by the ideology of state socialism, Romanians find themselves in the position of reconciling the selves shaped by these ideologies with the wider possibilities made available over the last couple of decades. The discrepancies between the traditional and the progressive have never been as evident as they are now.

Romanians, both as a society and as individuals, are split between, on the one hand, a moral code imposed by the still influential Orthodox Church, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the relentless tabloidization and pornographisation of mainstream media, coupled in recent years with the further democratisation offered by social media.

Romanian film culture can serve as a mirror for these paradigms and for the ways in which individuals work within them. When I say Romanian film culture, I mean to include not just film as a finite product, or artefact, made by Romanians in Romania, but a range of modes of production of meaning, in relation to film, in a Romanian context, e.g. film criticism and film journalism, legal and economic frameworks, film circulation and reception, and transnational exchanges as well. Because, in order to understand the representation of sex and sexuality in the Romanian cinematic context, one needs to crucially include the wider context which has fostered and shaped this representation. This thesis will therefore try to map the cinematic history of the inner schism between repression and freedom, trying to identify who or what restricted representation, and who or what allowed it, pinpointing sex and sexuality as fundamental dimensions of identity, in which this division has been most visible.

In other words, my thesis starts from trying to answer the questions: *How has the Romanian film culture been dealing with the themes of sex, sexuality, and sexual identities over the course of the last century? Subsequently, how have politics, society, and economy been influencing and controlling these representations?*

So, what is the point in exploring this? As all arts, cinema does not just act as a mirror

for the wider socio-political and economic environment in which it is made, but in turn it can shape the environment itself, as has often been argued<sup>4</sup>. Films, like all cultural products, are made by individuals conditioned by the milieu in which they create, which shifts and changes beyond their control. In the process of creation, filmmakers interact with that milieu, in different forms. Where there's no (or little) critical thinking involved in the filmmaking process, films often end up being a direct enforcement of the dominant ideology<sup>5</sup>. Filmmakers can rebel against their conditioning, but even then their final product is still impossible to detach from a wider, dominant ideology<sup>6</sup>. The audience response also has a direct influence on the social environment. If a film merely reproduces the dominant ideology, the audience ideological conditioning is strengthened, whereas if a film triggers a shift in the viewers' ways of thinking or feeling, or in their attitude toward society, the dominant ideology is weakened, and social change becomes more likely. In recent years, the world has become more and more divided by beliefs, which are rarely anything more than ideological conditioning. In order to understand, and possibly overcome, these divisions, we need to understand the ways in which ideological conditioning is achieved, and this is where this thesis aims to make a contribution. Similar to Carol Siegel, whose *Radical Sex Cinema* aims to look at (American) film as “a site of sexual representations that can either reinforce or resist the disciplinarity”<sup>7</sup> of pursuing and achieving the dream of “individual material success”, my project aims to explore aspects of film culture as sites of sexual

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<sup>4</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage Classics, 2009 [1957]; Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002 [1981].

<sup>5</sup> Vogel, Amos. *Film as a Subversive Art*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005 [1974].

<sup>6</sup> Comolli, Jean-Louis; and Jean Narboni. “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”. In *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics*. London SEFT, 1977. Originally published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 216 (October-November 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Siegel, Carol. *Sex Radical Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015, 2.

representation in relation to the more or less palpable disciplinarity of political ideology.

The two questions posed by this thesis are indivisible; the answer to one would be irrelevant without the answer to the other. I will therefore attempt to find answers to both, in parallel, moving forward on the chronological syntagm, from the earliest Romanian motion pictures up to the most recent ones. The chronological approach, while somewhat more straightforward from a methodological point of view, serves another purpose. It is meant to illustrate that the changes (if any) in the treatment of sex and sexuality in Romanian cinema are strongly connected (to the point of dependency) to the journey of Romanian society itself over the course of the last century.

## **I.2. Context**

### **I.2.1 Romanian Society, Sexuality and Cinema in the Eastern European Context**

To understand the specificities of cinematic attitudes toward sex and eroticism in Romania, one must first be familiar with the wider context in which these attitudes have been manifested.

Before 1947, Romania was a constitutional monarchy, with King Michael I the last monarch in power. It is widely acknowledged that between the beginning of the century and that crucial moment two years after the end of the Second World War, Romania experienced some of its most flourishing years. The fundamental state reforms set in place by its first two kings, Carol I (1866-1914) and Ferdinand (1914-1927), were to ensure a greater opening toward the West, better education, a more stable and modern



economy. Not everywhere though: the percentage of people living in rural areas, with limited access to culture and education, was considerably higher than that of urban dwellers, not to mention the up-and-coming middle class. According to *The Encyclopedia of Romania*, quoted by historian Lucian Boia<sup>8</sup>, only about 20% of Romanians were living in urban areas. Boia goes on to explain:

There can be no doubt that the elite was at a Western level; the interwar period saw a remarkable cultural effervescence. However, the general level of culture was much lower than in the West; in 1930, only 57 per cent of Romanians could read (compared to 60.3 per cent in Bulgaria, 84.8 per cent in Hungary and 92.6 per cent in Czechoslovakia).<sup>9</sup>

Religion was also widely spread and widely practised, predominantly in rural areas. The Eastern Orthodox doctrine had then, as it does now, a very strict set of morals. In its view, the material life is only a test for the afterlife, and should only be used to prepare oneself in spirit for what would follow after death. Fasting plays a major part in the doctrine, and it focusses on abstaining from all matters that might give the body any amount of pleasure (potentially “sinful” matters). Close to three quarters of the population were adhering to the Orthodox denomination, according to the 1930 census (the rest of the denominations were the Greek Catholic with 7.9% of adepts, Lutheran with 6.8%, Jewish with 4.2%, Roman Catholic with 3.9% and Reformed at 2%<sup>10</sup>).

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<sup>8</sup> Boia, Lucian. *Romania. Borderland of Europe*, Translated by James Christian Brown. London: Reaktion Books, 2001, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Pacurariu, Mircea, “Romanian Christianity”. In *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, edited by Ken Parry, 186-206. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 201.

Therefore, while in urban spaces attitudes toward sexuality were on a fast track to becoming more liberal, more open, the anti-eroticism morality preached by the Orthodox Church was very much the dominant pattern of thought.

The Communist Party's rise to power in 1948 brought a change in the Romanian social mores. At first glance, this change may seem very radical. The socialist ideology preached a type of "aggressive atheism"<sup>11</sup>, and the only institution that could have got in its way would have been the Orthodox Church, as the Catholic Church eventually did in Poland. However, as the Romanian historian points out, "the Orthodox Church has a long tradition of respect for political authority: it had always been more concerned with its theological message than with involvement in the life of the *polis*"<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps subordination would be a better word than respect, but there has been a visible complicity going on between the dominant religion and the Romanian state. The 1948 Law on Religious Confessions both guaranteed the freedom of conscience and religion, and subversively constrained it within the limits of "the Constitution, internal security, public order, and general morality", officially placing all religions under state control with the creation of the Ministry of Cults<sup>13</sup>. Again, a schism was born between what was officially rejected, but secretly accepted:

In public, professions of atheist conviction were frequent. And yet the churches remained open and were always full. In the theological seminaries, the number of candidates for the priesthood actually increased. Thus the Orthodox Church was

---

<sup>11</sup> Boia, *Romania. Borderland of Europe*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>13</sup> Deletant, Dennis. *Romania under Communist Rule*. Iasi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1999, 62.

left in peace, on the condition that it did not overstep its bounds.<sup>14</sup>

Economically, the communists' great focus was on industrialisation and urbanisation. In theory, this could translate into a departure from traditional, religious values and to secular ones, but that wasn't necessarily the case. The ultimate goal of the socialist regime was the creation of a so-called *new man*, a citizen with a very powerful work ethic, orientated toward the prosperity of the whole society and not distracted by abstractions. Both faith and love were concepts that, in the communist view, had no applicability in the building of what they called the *multilaterally developed socialist society*, to which every new man was supposed to aspire.

Soviet émigré academic Alexander Zinoviev is the author of an enlightening essay about communism, aimed at explaining the workings of the socialist society to audiences unfamiliar with the topic. While at times he seems to take things a little too personal (Zinoviev had to leave Russia in the 1970s because of his critical views), *The Reality of Communism* is a complex and accurate study, which I will talk about at length in Chapter IV. For now, I would just like to bring forth his idea about the prioritisation of the concept of “collectivity” in the socialist doctrine, and the rejection of individuality (and therefore of individual desire) as a legitimate state of the citizen in socialist regimes. This process was evident in all countries of the Eastern Bloc, from its beginnings in the immediate aftermath of World War II, until the fall of communism throughout the region in the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

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<sup>14</sup> Boia, *Romania. Borderland of Europe*, 117.

Gail Kligman in her study on “the politics of reproduction” demonstrates how, in communist Romania, an individual's sexuality only had purpose (and legitimacy) if its ultimate result was the creation of future generations of “new men”. The now infamous anti-abortion state Decree 770 from 1967 also prohibited any form of contraceptives or family planning. The informative role of sex education was restricted to the biological aspect of reproduction, and it pleaded for a morality in which desire was shameful and contemptible. This combination between disinformation and misinformation (by omission) would lead to record numbers of unwanted pregnancies, deaths and abandoned children. If there ever was proof of the tangible impact that discourses on sex and sexuality had on society, it is difficult to think of a more powerful one.

Society under state socialism was also marked by a culture of secrecy, or rather fake secrecy. As dissension with the official line could be drastically punished, all citizens were encouraged to keep their private matters away from the vigilant eyes of everyone else. In turn, as collaboration with the regime was usually rewarded, everyone paid close attention to everyone else's business. These attitudes are easily transferrable onto the discourse on sex and sexuality. Romanians did not stop having sex, but no one talked about it. At the same time, everyone knew that everyone else was having sex, but no one talked about that either. In institutional terms, things were very similar.

Referring strictly to the illegality of abortions (an argument which can easily be applied to all areas of private life though), Kligman explains that “banning abortion has never eradicated the practice of abortion”, but instead, it “renders the practice of abortion invisible in the public sphere”<sup>15</sup>. Talking about such intimate matters would imply the

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<sup>15</sup> Kligman, Gail. *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 6.

existence of an *alternative* discourse, but everyone knew (or at least was told) that there was only one valid (i.e. officially acceptable) discourse: that of the Communist Party.

The observations above paint the portrait of state socialism, including in its Romanian embodiment, in relation to the natural manifestations of sex and sexuality. They can be sublimated in a remark by Russian film journalist Marina Drozdova, who argues that intimate life in a socialist regime is “ousted” by “social and ideological considerations”:

These have taken up all the space in our distorted society for themselves; they have substituted themselves for the world of intimate relations. Only the biological and physiological aspects of these relations remain, and in those simple forms which the poorest, perpetually put-upon people might allow themselves.<sup>16</sup>

This substitution of intimacy with ideology would have a long-lasting impact on the sexual and emotional awareness of individuals living in the Eastern Bloc, and the film cultures of the area would oscillate between reiterating (and therefore validating) an ideology cleansed of genuine intimacy, and rebelling against it, within the limits of state censorship.

The fall of communism at the end of 1989 would bring down, at least legally, the limits of self-expression, but this didn't necessarily lead to sexual emancipation. Doina Pasca Harsanyi explains:

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<sup>16</sup> Drozdova, Marina. “Sublimations from Socialism. New Images of Women in Soviet Cinematography in the Era of Perestroika”. In *Red Women on the Silver Screen. Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era*, edited by Lynne Attwood. London: Pandora, 1993, 201.

The nauseating puritanical propaganda of the Ceausescu era produced a rush for all the earlier forbidden and sinful subjects. Eager to satisfy a hungry public, dozens of illustrated magazines have appeared – directed to both women and the general public – discussing feminine strategies, eroticism, sex, cosmetics, beauty, and fashion. These magazines, like all media, bypass such “boring” subjects as emancipation, equality, and the advancement of women, fearing, and rightly so, that the use of such concepts, so distorted by former propaganda, might sound too socialist to readers fed up with ideological arguments.<sup>17</sup>

What Pasca Harsanyi is trying to say is that in the aftermath of Ceausescu’s fall, the repression of state socialism was replaced by an outpouring of visibility as far as sex and sexuality were concerned, but this was mostly for the sake of visibility and availability, rather than in the form of a coherent, corrective and progressive discourse. One such discourse would begin to form within the Romanian society, in a similar manner to other former socialist states in Eastern Europe, at first rather chaotically, then in a more thoughtful manner. However, all these new democracies also saw the resurgence of organised religion. Its formal oppression during communism was now perceived as a “lack of spirituality” that “destroyed society”<sup>18</sup>. This “revived morality”<sup>19</sup> again came to influence the evolution of attitudes toward sex and sexuality. Turcescu

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<sup>17</sup> Pasca Harsanyi, Doina. “Women in Romania”. In *Gender Politics and Postcommunism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller. New York: Routledge, 1993, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Powell, David E., “The religious renaissance in the Soviet Union and its successor states”. In *The Social Legacy of Communism*, edited by James R. Millar and Sharon L. Wolchik. Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1994, 271.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

and Stan reveal and dissect this subject, referring to the division that topics such as homosexuality, abortion and prostitution created within the post-communist Romanian society. These became “areas in which the Romanian churches gave pronouncements with regard to acceptable behaviour for the larger society”<sup>20</sup>, and in which they lobbied with the ruling parties to impose and implement these pronouncements.

This interplay between politics and religion seems to be characteristic not just to the Romanian society, but to most countries of Eastern Europe, and it has a strong impact on their film cultures. Ewa Mazierska considers that both socialism and Catholicism have “a special position”<sup>21</sup> in shaping the treatment of love and intimacy in Polish, Czech and Slovak films. She also deems the patriarchal ideologies of both socialism and Catholicism (which, in Romania's case, one could easily replace with the Orthodox Church), to be “chiefly responsible for the failure of Polish, Czech and Slovak men as lovers”<sup>22</sup> in their respective national cinemas. On that note, I will now investigate the specifics.

### **I.2.2 Romanian Films and Sexuality**

When Salt'n'Pepa invited the world to talk about sex in their 1991 hit, their main justification was that the subject “keeps coming up anyhow”. “Don't decoy, avoid, or make void the topic / Cuz that ain't gonna stop it”, they said. This snippet of American pop wisdom was being mirrored over an ocean and over the continent, in Eastern

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<sup>20</sup> Turcescu, Lucian, and Lavinia Stan. “Religion, Politics and Sexuality in Romania”. *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no. 2 (2005): 291-310, 292.

<sup>21</sup> Mazierska, Ewa. *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema. Black Peters and Men of Marble*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008, 215.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Europe, where the nations were fretfully breaking their communist chains and jumping on the capitalist wagon toward freedom.

As previously stated, Romania is one of the countries that rendered 45 years of state socialism legitimate through means of decoying, avoiding, and making void undesirable topics. If one wasn't allowed to speak of things, those things weren't spoken about. If they weren't spoken about, they didn't exist. And if they didn't exist, there was nothing to stop neither the so-called multilateral development of society nor the moulding of the *new man*.

In the context of creating a state discourse based on rendering sexuality invisible, one could argue that the subject of sex in Romanian cinema is not something that exists per se. In this regard, writing a history of representations of sexuality in Romanian cinema is writing a history of something that doesn't exist. However, the reason it doesn't exist is because it hasn't been spoken about, and it hasn't been spoken about mainly because it was one of the things one wasn't allowed to speak of during most of Romanian cinema's history – a history that, in its greater part, overlapped with the communist rule, which, in Mazierska's words, “is in principle anti-love and even more anti-eroticism”<sup>23</sup>.

It is here that my research questions come into focus again, to reshape the discussion. The existence or non-existence of sex in Romanian cinema is something that's strongly linked to the prevalent ideology and the political mechanisms that set it into motion. In Romania, like in most of Eastern Europe, film “has never been separable from

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 134.



politics”<sup>24</sup>, and it could act both “as a weapon of the state for the promulgation of official doctrine or as a medium of criticism and dissent”<sup>25</sup>. According to David Paul, this may be extended to arts and culture in general, who have a long tradition of playing a political part in this region of Europe. Artists, he argues, have always “considered themselves to articulate the destiny of a nation”<sup>26</sup>. I would take this further to say that this role of theirs became even more important in the socialist society, where art was programmatically and institutionally subordinated to state ideology. If the “collective” or society as a whole were meant to be the main focus of artists and creative types, then the private matters of the individual, of which sexuality is part of, never really stood a chance of being given enough attention.

There is also, of course, the crucial aspect of censorship under communism, which I'll look at in a detailed manner later on in this research. For now, let's just consider Paul's assertion that film is “the most easily restricted [art] (...) by an authoritarian government – especially a government that controls all the material resources necessary to the functioning of what is a structurally complex industry”<sup>27</sup>. In Romania, as in all communist countries of Eastern Europe, all prerogatives regarding the production and distribution of films were exercised by the state.

Earlier on, in the Romanian cinema of the second and third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, matters of the heart, lusty affairs, and bedroom games can be commonly found – and it

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<sup>24</sup> Paul, David W., ed. *Politics, Art and Commitment in the East European Cinema*. London: Macmillan, 1983, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13.

suffices to just look at some of the film titles of that period to realise what filmmakers and audiences were interested to depict, on the one hand, and to watch, on the other: *Fatal Love / Amor fatal* (Grigore Brezeanu, 1911), *Love at the Convent / Dragoste la manastire* (G. Georgescu, 1914), *Sin / Pacat* (Jean Mihail, 1924), *Lache in the Harem / Lache in Harem* (Marcel Blossoms, Vasile D. Ionescu, 1927), *The Symphony of Love / Simfonia dragostei* (Ion Sahighian, 1928), *The Call of Love / Chemarea dragostei* (Jean Mihail, 1932), to name but a few. Most of these films have been lost, but brief plot descriptions indicate the filmmakers' interest in portraying love stories on screen. In *The Symphony of Love*, a young painter falls in love with both the daughter and the wife of a priest. In *The Call of Love*, a young peasant woman falls in love with a young nobleman, her passion drawing her toward the city and its perils, only to be brought back to her village by a young man from the same class as her. The main character in *Lache in the Harem* is an unemployed young man who has a dream about breaking in a harem, where he falls in love with (and then rescues) a beautiful woman named Lily, who was brought there by human traffickers.

Many such films were then considered “immoral”, and most of the Romanian authors who were trying to conceptualise and theorise cinema at the time were pleading for “a moral, ethical, and educational function” of this new art form<sup>28</sup>. After 1948, the newly installed communist government was very keen on eliminating this “immoral” cinema from the lives of Romanians. There were other things to focus on, and in all arts, in cinema more than others, passions were seen as destructive and therefore had to be suppressed. Inspired by the legendary doctrine implemented by Andrei Zhdanov (Soviet

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<sup>28</sup> Caliman, Calin. *Istoria filmului românesc (1897-2010)*. Bucharest: Editura Contemporanul. 2011, 83.

Union's authority on cultural policy between 1941 and 1948), arts were to have, above all, the moral, ethical, and educational function, which had already been called for publically during previous decades.

A new Romanian cinema was born – a male-centred, heroic, phallic cinema – that had no place for what was considered weak, no place for instincts, for feelings, for intimacy. This kind of cinema was going to perpetuate throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, when the focus of most films had to be “the new man”, the productive man – or, in Freud's words, the man who could sublimate his erotic instincts into work – and in which sexuality were to be treated “incidentally”, if we think back to the dialogue between Nicolae Ceausescu and filmmakers referenced at the start of this section.

The 1970s and the 1980s were marked by two currents in Romanian cinema: one that supported the official rule, and made films that praised what the regime said had to be praised (the glorious national history, and the *macho* heroes who made it), and one that was trying, timidly, to keep an artistic integrity and depict what they felt had to be depicted. Filmmakers in the latter category were finding that being open and genuine about sex, sexuality, and relationships was an increasingly difficult task, and in most cases it all had to be carefully disguised, wrapped in metaphors and *double entendres*.

Post-1990, when state socialism was overturned and access to the Western culture was liberalised, the representations of sex and sexuality on screen have increased in quantity, or, rather, in *visibility*. According to revered film critics though, this hyperbolisation of eroticism almost always came across as being in bad taste. To give just one example,

film critic Andrei Gorzo says about reputed director's Mircea Muresan's *Azucena* (Romania, 2005) that he has never in his life seen “another film that tries so desperately to be porn, and doesn't manage to”<sup>29</sup>. Romanian cinema had to move forward in order to achieve a more balanced and honest approach in regards to sexuality. However, while some (very few) of these contemporary cinematic works choose to “talk” openly about sexual matters, others seem to “think” (and feel, and breathe) sexuality in its primal, rawest, darkest aspect: Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days / 4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile* (Cristian Mungiu, Romania-Belgium, 2007) is as much about rape, as it is about the strategies of obtaining an illegal abortion in the repressive years of state socialism, while the same director's *Beyond the Hills / Dupa dealuri* (Cristian Mungiu, Romania / France / Belgium, 2012) is one of the first Romanian films to portray the complexities of living as a sexual outsider in a society dominated by tradition and religious dogma.

### **I.3. Scope and Structure**

#### **I.3.1. Scope and Corpus of Films**

The scope of this project is restricted to live-action feature films released in Romanian cinemas between 1912 and the present day. While animation, documentaries, short films and videos would undoubtedly offer a more complete overview of the topic under scrutiny, they would also push this research far beyond the limits of a PhD thesis. For the same reason, but also due to their rather underground quality, Romanian pornographic films will also be left out.

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<sup>29</sup> Gorzo, Andrei. “Porniri porno”. <http://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/2901/Andrei-Gorzo/Porniri-porno-Azucena-Ingerul-de-abanos-de-Mircea-Muresan.html>. May, 2006.

In terms of references, I will use the following format when introducing a film for the first time: *English Title / Original Title* (Director, Country, Year). Subsequently, I shall only refer to it using the *English Title* (either in its widespread translation or, where not available, in my own translation). As far as working with books, articles and other sources that have not been published in the English language, they will be referenced by their original title only, and where quoting them directly I will provide my own translation into English. As for the literature, the books and articles quoted which have originally been published in Romanian have been referenced in relation to their original title. Where I have cited Romanian sources for which a translation has not been available, I have provided my own translation.

Cinema releases covering more than a century are a considerable amount of material to work with. Due to the historical nature of this study, there will be many films referenced here. Some, however, will come into focus more than others. Furthermore, I have selected a number of films that I want to look at in depth, either due to their subject matter, or because the aspects of sex and sexuality they reveal are of particular relevance to this research. In the chronological order of their release, these films are *In Our Village / La noi in sat* (Jean Georgescu, Victor Iliu, Romania, 1951), *The Mill of Good Luck / La Moara cu noroc* (Victor Iliu, Romania, 1956), *A Midsummer Day's Smile / Un suras in plina vara* (Geo Saizescu, Romania, 1963), *A Charming Girl / Un film cu o fata fermecatoare* (Lucian Bratu, Romania, 1966), *Michael the Brave / Mihai Viteazul* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, Romania, 1971), *Picture Postcards with Wild Flowers / Ilustrate cu flori de camp* (Andrei Blaier, Romania, 1974), *Microphone Test / Proba de*

*microfon* (Mircea Daneliuc, Romania, 1980), *The Cruise / Croaziera* (Mircea Daneliuc, Romania, 1981), *The Conjugal Bed / Patul conjugal* (Mircea Daneliuc, Romania, 1993), *Love and Hot Water / Dragoste si apa calda* (Dan Mironescu, Romania, 1992), *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days / 4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile* (Cristian Mungiu, Romania-Belgium, 2007), *Sick Love / Legaturi bolnavicioase* (Tudor Giurgiu, Romania-France, 2006), and *Beyond the Hills / Dupa dealuri* (Cristian Mungiu, Romania, 2013).

The research focus has different layers. Methodologically, the original contribution that this thesis brings to scholarship on both Romanian cinema and sexuality in the cinema is by means of archival research, as it aims to unearth and investigate a wealth of primary sources rarely referenced in scholarship. First of all, I will look at the political, economic and social components that impacted the production and/or the distribution of a film, or a range of films. Where possible, I try to look at Romanian audiences' reception of the various films mentioned here, but also the reception that foreign films, more or less openly erotic, had in Romania. A thorough examination of the film criticism discourse, within the historical context, is something else that this project originally contributes to the various strands of scholarship. This third and final aspect is not without its challenges though. The primary sources of information on audiences include (quantitatively) box-office figures and (qualitatively) sources such as Romanian film journals from the socialist era, which regularly published letters sent by audiences keen to express their own views on the films they'd seen. The main challenge here is taking into account and working around the degree of censorship that these letters were subjected to, be that self-censorship, or censorship by the journal editors. Finally, in the case of the films chosen as case studies, the project combines close analysis with an

exploration of the narrative (analysing how the theme of sex and/or intimacy is or isn't integral to the film) and dialogue. Romanian cinema is, in general, dialogue-driven, due to both the cultural context (modelled on the French, mainly throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and to a tradition of realism in Romanian cinema, as shown by e.g. Nasta<sup>30</sup> or Gorzo<sup>31</sup>. If dialogue weighs heavier in the analysis of films, this is because it mirrors the importance given to it by filmmakers.

### **I.3.2. Structure**

This thesis adopts a chronological paradigm, moving forward in the historical analysis from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The study is therefore split into three major sections, or parts. The first (shorter) section will look at the period before 1948, from which very few films are still available for consultation. I will explore the connection between the explosion of cinema as “the seventh art” at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the first cinematic creations in Romania as being primarily focused on love stories. I plan on looking at the impact that so-called “sentimental dramas” (arguably the most popular film genre in pre-WWII Romania), as well as that of (few) raunchier comedies, may have had on a repression-prone public morality, shaped by traditions as well as by the conservative Orthodox Church.

The second major section of the project is made up of the films of the Communist period (beginning in 1948), and the chapters that constitute this section each aims to centre on a major theme. In the first chapter here, *Cinema and Sexuality under Stalinist*

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<sup>30</sup> Nasta, Dominique. *Contemporary Romanian Cinema. The History of an Unexpected Miracle*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Gorzo, Andrei. *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel. Un mod de a gandi cinemaul, de la Andre Bazin la Cristi Puiu*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012.

*Precepts*, I will focus the discussion on the act of de-feminisation that female characters underwent on screen during Communism, as well as the ways in which sexuality was used in the so-called class war, in order to demonise enemies of the state through the medium of film. The following two chapters (*Some Mice That Roar. Hints of Liberalisation in the 1960s*, and *Postcards from the National Hero Age*) will analyse the golden age of Communism and its core masculine values, with a focus on the disjunction between the working male's moral and societal duties on one hand, and his more instinctual erotic passions. I shall also peek at the symbolic sexuality of the very popular genre of the national epic, as well as discuss in detail the filmic treatment of the trauma inflicted on generations of women by the prohibition of abortions. The third chapter in this section focuses on the austere 1980s, the increasingly powerful censorship, and filmmaker strategies to get around restrictions concerning erotic representation.

The third major section of the research takes into account the post-Communist period (after 1990), and is broken down into two distinct chapters. The first one here (*Bikinis in the Ashes of the Empire. The Nakedness of the Post-Communist Thaw*) shall look at that much condemned “bad taste” that came with the freedom gained at the end of 1989, illustrated by the exacerbated enthusiasm with which some of the Romanian filmmakers of the 1990s attacked the depictions of the naked body. This will be followed by *Out of the Dark: Cinema, Sexuality and the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, a chapter in which I analyse in detail how the post-2000 cinema of Romania reconsidered the importance of sex and sexuality on screen, taking small steps to both a more honest approach of these themes, and a cinematic conceptualisation of them; it will also include a



discussion on the emergence of non-normative sexualities, and the feeble and timid depiction of these on Romanian screens.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This thesis aims to contribute to two fields of study, primarily: that of Romanian cinema and that of sex and sexuality in cinema. By extension, in its contribution to the study of Romanian film culture, it is also intended to add to debates in the wider field of Eastern European cinema. The contributions to these fields will be discussed below. On the other hand, the approach taken also borrows from two other strands of scholarship, that on sex and sexuality, and the more socio-anthropological one on Romanian history and society. For conceptual and definitional purposes, I find it necessary to trace out some of the main strands of thinking in these areas that are valuable in supporting, either by way of approach, or by way of evidence, the building of the main arguments of the thesis, and the attempts to answer the research questions.

### II.1 Literature on Romanian Cinema

In 2006, Romanian filmmaker Tudor Giurgiu made *Sick Love / Legaturi bolnavicioase* (Tudor Giurgiu, Romania-France, 2006), his first feature film, an adaptation of Cecilia Stefanescu's novel *Legaturi bolnavicioase*. The film tackled themes never before explored in Romanian cinema: lesbian love and incest. On its release, film critic Eugenia Voda, refused to attend the press screening, on account of the film's themes revolving around non-normative sexuality. Giurgiu remembers: "She thought she wouldn't like to see a film about such things. She barely agreed to go in the cinema, but she did watch it, and she was surprised to... When it was over, she told me she wasn't expecting that, that she thought it was something remarkable, and that it was a good

thing after all.”<sup>32</sup>. The fact that a “relevant integrated professional”<sup>33</sup> such as Voda, who should be inherently interested in any release, initially objected to seeing a film simply because of its subject matter and then “accepted” that “taboo” subject for the “delicate” way in which it was treated – that is symptomatic for the puritanical critical discourse on cinematic sex and sexuality in Romania.

The main drive behind most Romanian studies focussing on this national cinema seems to still be getting to grips with the fact that there is a history to be told. There is a wide range of books written on “the history of Romanian cinema”, but few of them manage to venture outside a purely descriptive and chronological framework. Some more focussed attempts have been made, in the past few years, such as journalist Cristian Tudor Popescu's study on propaganda in pre-1989 films<sup>34</sup>, or Marilena Iliesiu's history of cinematic narrative formulae<sup>35</sup>. However, more sensitive topics, topics relating to either content or representation, are avoided (not necessarily consciously) through the proliferation of “dictionaries” of Romanian cinema and Romanian film-makers, strictly factual inventories that thrive in their harmlessness while eschewing any critical responsibility. This is by no means to say that the literature on Romanian cinema is limited to dictionaries. Some truly valuable efforts have been made recently, starting with Andrei Gorzo's study of realism in cinema (applied to Romanian films as well as European cinema more generally)<sup>36</sup>, and ending with quite a few books on the

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<sup>32</sup> Radu, Raluca-Nicoleta. *Institutiile culturale in tranzitie. Despre creativitate in jurnalismul si cinematografia din Romania, dupa 1944*. Bucharest: Nemira, 2011, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Popescu, Cristian Tudor. *Filmul surd in Romania muta: politica si propaganda in filmul romanesc de fictiune (1912-1989)*. Iasi: Polirom, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Iliesiu, Marilena. *Povestea povestii in filmul romanesc (1912-2012)*. Iasi: Polirom, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse....*

Romanian New Wave<sup>37</sup>. However thorough in their methodologies, they are mainly concerned with descriptions of contemporary Romanian cinema as a phenomenon and its contextualisation within the wider global cinema. They may touch on specific topics related to content and audiences, but they are, mostly, studies of the industry.

It is, of course, extremely important that these studies do exist. My thesis is merely aimed at complementing the purely historical scholarship, and provide a model to encourage more studies on representation in Romanian film culture, as well as on making more connections between historical context, film content and aesthetics, and audience reception. At the same time, given the scope of the study, one of its main intentions is to open the field to looking at things beyond the Romanian New Wave, which has almost become a favourite of the literature on Romanian cinema – the danger of that being that the perspective will remain skewed or, at least, incomplete. One notable exception is Laszlo Strausz' very recent study<sup>38</sup>, which is specifically focussed on making connections between the Romanian New Wave and the longer tradition of cinema in Romania.

In the scholarship on Romanian cinema, eroticism almost always stands as one of those ignored topics, which is in itself quite a paradox. Nudity and sex have spread through Romanian media ever since its “liberation” in 1990, and it is not an uncommon practice for sex subjects to lead newspapers' first pages, or for vaguely pornographic content to be seen on prime-time television, which is proof that sex is a much more popular object

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<sup>37</sup> Fulger, Mihai. *Noul val in cinematografia romaneasca*. Bucharest: Editura Art, 2006; Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema*; Pop, Doru. *Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Strausz, Laszlo. *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

of interest for Romanians than their national cinema may suggest. This is similar to the paradox described by Francoise Navailh in a 1992 essay, in which she argues that Russian cinema (with which all Eastern European cinemas, including the Romanian one, have indisputable similarities) “presents asexual beings”, and that “this apparent prudishness contrasts with the ordinary language and sexual habits which are very crude”<sup>39</sup>. My research attempts, if not to fill this void about “speaking” about eroticism (both cinematically and academically), at least make the void visible. Drawing attention to the non-existent is the first step to bringing it into existence.

Following on from that, and to wrap up this section, I would like to briefly mention the contribution that this thesis intends to also make to the larger field of Eastern European cinema scholarship.

On the one hand, it aims to be part of a wider concern to bring the cinema cultures of this region from the margins of film scholarship closer to its centre. It is thus aligned in its intention with that of Ewa Mazierska, Matilda Mroz and Elzbieta Ostrowska, whose recently edited collection on the image of the body in Eastern European and Russian films has, as one of its stated purposes, the fostering of “a more inclusive vision of material and film culture”<sup>40</sup> as a corrective pursuit in relation to the marginalisation of the films of the region in the wider European and world cinema scholarship.

On the other hand, I would also argue that scholarship on Romanian cinema tends to be,

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<sup>39</sup> Navailh, Francoise. “The Image of Women in Contemporary Soviet Cinema”. In *The Red Screen. Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, edited by Anna Lawton. London: Routledge, 1992, 225.

<sup>40</sup> Mazierska, Ewa, Matilda Mroz and Elzbieta Ostrowska, eds. *The Cinematic Bodies of Eastern Europe and Russia. Between Pain and Pleasure*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 1.

more often than not, either absent or marginalised within Eastern European film studies. This is due, I believe, to a geographical and geopolitical positioning which makes Romania be perceived as not quite belonging to what is commonly understood by Eastern European cinema. The distinction between what is, and what isn't, Eastern Europe, or indeed, how films from the Eastern region of Europe should even be delineated, has been at the forefront of the debate on cinemas of the region for decades. Iordanova, for example, distinguishes between East Central European cinemas (which include Poland, Hungary, and the two countries formerly known as Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), and Balkan cinemas, which she considers Romania to be a part of<sup>41</sup> (also shown by the inclusion of Romanian films in her edited collection surveying films from the Balkans<sup>42</sup>). Mazierska, Mroz and Ostrowska's collection referenced above, while aiming to trace representations of the body within Eastern Europe (and Russia), includes an essay on Yugoslav cinema, more obviously Balkan than, say, Romania. By way of contrast, for example, Aniko Imre's 2012 collection<sup>43</sup> expands the scope of Eastern European cinemas to include Romania, countries from the Balkans, but also Turkey and cinemas from Baltic countries. These delimitations only go to reflect wider geopolitical debates regarding the region, and indeed mirror Romanians' own perception of which part of Europe the country belongs to: inhabitants of Bucharest and the wider southern area of Wallachia are both geographically and culturally closer to the Balkans, while those in the North-Western area of Transylvania have historically felt closer to East Central Europe, not least due to the region being a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for centuries. It is perhaps this ambiguity that lies

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<sup>41</sup> Iordanova, Dina. *Cinema of the Other Europe. The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Iordanova, Dina, ed. *The Cinema of the Balkans*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Imre, Aniko, ed. *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

within Romania's dual position, straddling both East Central Europe and the Balkans, which accounts for fewer, or less substantive, critical interventions on its films and film culture. This thesis aims to correct this to an extent, contextualising Romanian cinema as part of Eastern European cinemas more generally, often understood as cinemas from the former Eastern bloc rather than from the geographic East or South-East of Europe.

## II.2. Literature on Sexuality in the Cinema

Linda Williams' *Screening Sex*, her study of the representations of nudity and the sexual act in Hollywood films, is one of the books that inspired and gave impulse to this research. That is because Williams introduces an important nuance when referring to the term *to screen*, which can be used to designate both the action of revealing on a screen, and that of sheltering or protecting with a screen. In this sense, she says, movies "both reveal and conceal", and, from that point of view, she argues, "no one has told the history of screening sex as a history of the relation between revelation and concealment"<sup>44</sup>. It is this precise statement that firmly sits at the foundation of this research. My history of sex in Romanian cinema will therefore be a history of this relationship between making (or allowing to be) visible and hiding from vision, which was indeed the kind of tension that shaped the Romanian society for so many years.

Projects such as Lindsay Coleman's *Sex and Storytelling* aim to explain and illustrate how "explicit sex can be an essential element of storytelling in narrative cinema"<sup>45</sup>. The edited anthology stresses the impact of film sexuality on the audience, and on its

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, Linda. *Screening Sex*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Coleman, Lindsay, ed. *Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema: Explicit Sex, Performance, and Cinematic Technique*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014, 3.

“understanding of its own basic, survival needs, its complementary desire to thrive”<sup>46</sup>, although the actual work focusses on how cinematic techniques are used to effect this understanding. The close analysis of the essays in Coleman’s collection, as in those of Tanya Krzywinska’s book, needs to be complemented by a wider look at how socio-political contexts can shape the content when it comes to representing sex and sexuality, and this is how my thesis aims to complement current research in the field. From this point of view, in its intentions, my thesis also diverges from works of theorists such as Jacqueline Rose, who believes that “sexuality lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer”<sup>47</sup>. It is beyond the scope of this project to explore the intricacies of the relationships between affect, spectatorship and film sexuality. On the other hand, it is difficult, as well as unproductive, to measure where film sexuality “lies”. There is not just one locus for film and sexuality. Sex and sexuality may lie in the production context *as well as* in the content of films, and in “the subjectivity of the viewer”. My work aims to explore how sexuality is produced, by the socio-political context, before it reaches – and before it is embodied in, and transformed by – the subjectivity of the viewer.

To a degree, this is also a study in representation, but understood more in Carol Siegel’s terms, who argues that “the representation of sexualities on film concerns more than how sexual desires, object choices, and acts are depicted. It also concerns how these depictions fit into a world-view determined by beliefs and anxieties that may initially seem only tangentially relevant to sexual politics but on closer examination are

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Rose, Jacqueline. *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London: Verso, 1986, 227.



inextricable from them”<sup>48</sup>. One cannot convincingly look at representation in isolation from the “world-view” in which it fits (or doesn’t), and examining this “world-view” (or, in other words, the socio-cultural context of representation) becomes not just useful, but rather crucial.

The impulse for this research is also directed at filling a void in the academic discussion on the topic of sex in the cinema in Eastern Europe. So far, there has been little scholarship dedicated to sex and sexuality as depicted on the screens of that part of the continent, which, again, spent most of its existence under the repressed/repressive Communist ideology. The topic is partially touched upon by books such as Mazierska's *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema. Black Peters and Men of Marble*, in which it is discussed (but restricted by Mazierska's own research framework) in two chapters, *Larks on a String, or Men in Love* and *You Will Not Find Much? Construction of Men's 'Other Sexualities' in Polish and Czechoslovak Cinema*. Expanding the frame, one can also find a handful of studies related to both masculinity and femininity in Russian / Soviet cinema<sup>49</sup>.

There are, however, several notable studies that focus on specific aspects of sex, sexuality and sexual identity in the cinema, which this research aims to complement, as well as nuance the discussion by focussing on a national cinema framework that is not necessarily Western European. As suggested already, this study is related to Tanya Krzywinska’s contribution to scholarship, as it partly shares the same goal of showing

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<sup>48</sup> Siegel, *Radical Sex Cinema*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. Haynes, John. *New Soviet Man. Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003; Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen*.

“how the representation of sex in cinema is subject to historical, cultural and stylistic change”<sup>50</sup>, although Krzywinska’s approach is also overwhelmingly focussed on, if not Hollywood, at least American cinema. Lindsay Coleman’s collection<sup>51</sup>, while opening the area of exploration to global (art) cinema, is mostly concerned with the explicitness of the sexual act, and the framework is predominantly made of close analysis, looking at sexuality on screen in relation to cinematic techniques, and the storytelling function of explicit sex. More recently published, Darren Kerr and Donna Peberdy’s anthology<sup>52</sup> narrows the focus even more, and looks specifically at the ways in which cinema deals with sexual perversion – with the majority of the films discussed being yet again part of the Western film cultures.

Beyond the literature of sex in cinema, there are vast contributions to approaches to queer cinema, as well as queerness in cinema. This thesis probably has less to contribute to this scholarship, although it is certainly both inspired and, in parts, driven by developments in this area of study. Non-normative sexualities are only briefly touched upon in the first and second section of my study, but I do expand the discussion to include these in the final chapter. This is purely for evidence-related reasons, as queerness has not been dealt with in Romanian films before the 2000s, nor have queer-themed films been accessible to Romanian audiences prior to this decade. Nevertheless, the small contribution that I envision this last chapter to have is once more a corrective one, aimed to bring an Eastern European perspective to a discourse dominated by an exploration of queerness in Western film cultures<sup>53</sup>. Even when trying to go beyond

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<sup>50</sup> Krzywinska, Tanya. *Sex and the Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Coleman, *Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema*.

<sup>52</sup> Kerr, Peberdy, eds. *Tainted Love. Screening Sexual Perversion*.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Benschhoff, Harry M. and Sean Griffin. *Queer Cinema. The Film Reader*. Oxford: Routledge, 2004;

Hollywood or English-speaking cinema, most studies tend to stop within the limits of Western Europe<sup>54</sup>. Some exceptions do expand the debate to include queerness in films from countries like Turkey, or even the former Yugoslavia<sup>55</sup>, as Schoonover and Galt's do in their complex and comprehensive study on global cinematic queerness<sup>56</sup>.

Taking a step back, one can clearly see that the majority of studies written on the subject of sex and sexuality in the cinema have, at their core, something whose existence was a priori established, i.e. actual sex on celluloid. Michael Milner covers the topic of "sex as the substance and content of the different forms of celluloid", which, he argues, has always had "a universal appeal"<sup>57</sup>. Similar to Thomas R. Atkins' collection of essays<sup>58</sup>, one of Milner's primary objects of study are genres in which eroticism plays a crucial element, i.e. pornography, and even some experimental films, as well as the so-called "nudies" or "nude cuties" of the 1960s and '70s. Elena Gorfinkel has worked extensively on issues related to adult cinema, having most notably looked at the social and legal context in which American sexploitation films were made<sup>59</sup>. Still keeping close to genres, Linda Ruth Williams delves into the 1980s genre of the erotic thriller<sup>60</sup> (itself extremely popular in Romania a decade later). However, one does (understandably) wonder how a history of sex in Romanian cinema would look like, and

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Hart, *Queer Males in Contemporary Cinema* etc.

<sup>54</sup> Griffiths, Robin, ed. *Queer Cinema in Europe*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Dawson, Leanne, ed. *Queer European Cinema. Queering Cinematic Time and Space*. Oxford: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Schoonover, Karl, Rosalind Galt. *Queer Cinema in the World*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Milner, Michael. *Sex on Celluloid*. New York: MacFadden, 1964, 8-9.

<sup>58</sup> Atkins, Thomas R., ed. *Sexuality in the Movies*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975.

<sup>59</sup> Gorfinkel, Elena. *Lewd Looks. American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, Linda Ruth. *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

how relevant it would be, when none of the aforementioned genres are present in it.

This is where the present study comes to make its contribution.

The point above is actually applicable to all national cinemas of former socialist states. Being “in principle anti-eroticism”, to reiterate Mazierska's assertion, it seems that sexual subjects were, really, fairly absent from Eastern European films made in countries where there was no period of liberalisation, such as the 1960s in Polish and Czechoslovak cinema, or the Russian perestroika. Speaking about Soviet society in the 1970s, and underlining “the sublimation of the personal into the social, the 'citizenly’”, Marina Drozdova states that “real sex also did not appear on screen before perestroika of course”<sup>61</sup>. But she further goes to say that, even when the cultural environment is more open and the censorship becomes looser, eroticism on screen still has an unnatural quality to it. The cinema in the era of perestroika and glasnost, Drozdova argues, does not offer “real erotic images”: “It is not depicting real sexual energy; real sexual relations are still hardly ever shown on the screen. Sex represents the sublimation of rather different urges”<sup>62</sup>. This assertion is perfect proof of how the relationship between revelation and concealment may play out: there is a revealed sex and there is a concealed sex, and the revelation can be concealment at the same time.

But perhaps screening sex comes down to more than the depiction of “real sexual energy”. From this point of view, the drive behind my research dwells on optimism. The distinction between erotic and non-erotic may perhaps be more blurred than expected and, therefore, more interesting than a clear-cut one, as some critics point out. Durgnat,

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<sup>61</sup> Drozdova, *Sublimations from Socialism*, 198.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

for instance, argues that to make such a distinction means “almost always to misinterpret it”:

The real explosions of erotic feeling in the spectator are induced not by blatant displays of 'it', 'oomph', cleavage, or cheese- or beef-cake, but by finding the often hidden or apparently meaningless points where the entire personality feels itself invaded by powerful erotic urges, and either magnetised into a lyrical unity or convulsed in conflict.<sup>63</sup>

Moving forward, if we consider “revelation and concealment” to be the syntagm (in Saussure's terms) for this research, its paradigm would be the “institutional, discursive and socio-cultural-historical” framework defined by Tanya Krzywinska as one of the “various forces” by which “cinematic sex, in whatever guise, is squeezed into shape”<sup>64</sup>. In other words, I will be looking at the ways in which cinematic sex, whether in the rare instances where it was overtly depicted or in the majority of cases where it was just hinted at, was influenced by what society and the state deemed acceptable or unacceptable (here, the tension between the invisible and the visible comes into play again, and it is also expressed in the title of this study).

Perhaps the real question isn't whether Michael the Brave “can love or not”, but how important it is that he, or any other character in Romanian cinema, can or cannot. The importance of sex and sexuality as they are either depicted or alluded to on screen is something that most scholars have agreed upon. Starting with Andre Bazin, who, in his

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<sup>63</sup> Durgnat, Raymond. *Eros in the Cinema*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1966, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 6.

“Marginal Notes on *Eroticism in the Cinema*”, claims that “it is of the cinema alone that we can say that eroticism is there on purpose and is a basic ingredient”<sup>65</sup>, moving forward to Alexander Walker whose book *Sex in the Movies. The Celluloid Sacrifice* was inspired by French filmmaker Jean Cocteau's idea of cinema as “a temple of sex, with its goddesses, its guardians, and its victims”<sup>66</sup>, and arriving at Linda Williams again, who suggests that films are “the most powerful sex education most of us will ever receive”<sup>67</sup>, theorists of sex on screen have acknowledged, each in their own way, each with different nuances, the strong bond between the erotic movements and moving images. However, in my own approach to the subject I tend to be guided by the slightly more controversial (and, in fact, rather Foucauldian) idea put forward by Richard Dyer in *Heavenly Bodies*, where he argues that sexuality (and, implicitly, screen sexuality) is a means through which we are both “designated a place in society” and “kept in [our] place”<sup>68</sup>.

### **II.3. Literature on Sexuality**

Histories of sex are not just histories of depicting sex, and, from that point of view, the impulse for my research is Foucauldian, to an extent. Suggesting that not talking about sexuality is in itself a form of talking about it, Michel Foucault argues that “silence itself (...) is less the absolute limit of discourse (...) than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies”<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> Bazin, Andre. *What is Cinema? Vol. II*. Essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1971, 170.

<sup>66</sup> Walker, Alexander. *Sex in the Movies. The Celluloid Sacrifice*. London: Penguin Books, 1969, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Williams, *Screening Sex*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies. Film Stars and Society*. London: Routledge, 1993 [1986], 26.

<sup>69</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1. An Introduction*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1976], 27.

His ideas illustrating the strong connection between sexuality and power, and the “discourses” that relationship yields, constitute one of the lenses through which I will look at sexuality in the Romanian film culture.

There have been several critical views on Foucault and his stance on sexuality, and I'm interested in exploring them in relation to the topic of this research. Anthony Giddens' study *The Transformation of Intimacy*, while acknowledging the merits of Foucault's hypotheses, is not afraid to complement or contradict them at times. Giddens' critique of Foucault putting “too much emphasis upon sexuality at the expense of gender”<sup>70</sup>, as well as the French philosopher's “overwhelming emphasis on discourse”<sup>71</sup>, which is allegedly detrimental to a clear view of the “conception of the self in relation to modernity”, are certainly well-articulated points that are worth taking into account.

I am also keen on Giddens' coinage of the term *plastic sexuality*, by which he means “decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction”, one that “can be moulded as a trait of personality and thus is intrinsically bound up with the self”<sup>72</sup>. From a historical point of view, the concept of plastic sexuality is extremely useful when one considers its opposite, manifest in the insistence with which the Romanian socialist state attempted to only define sexuality in relation to reproduction (a *rigid sexuality*, if one is to define it as the opposite of Giddens' concept).

Dennis Altman suggests that, generally, theorists who “concern themselves with

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<sup>70</sup> Giddens, Anthony. *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford: Polity Press, 1992, 24.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

questions of sexuality and gender often ignore questions of material and institutional power”<sup>73</sup>. One of this study’s original contributions is precisely in its examination of sexuality in relation to material and institutional power. It is necessary to explore the specific contexts of power (whether political, economic, social or cultural power), which is why this study tends to adopt a more historiographical approach rather than a purely theoretical one. Sexuality (including screen sexuality) does not exist in a vacuum, and cannot be fully understood in isolation from the contexts in which it manifests itself, whether it is shaped by them, or whether, in Altman’s words, it “remains a powerful imperative resistant”<sup>74</sup> to them.

The historiographical approach of this project, and its insistence on considering contexts as equally worthy of examination as the specific analysis of the representation of sexuality, contributes to what Gayle S. Rubin deems a necessary “radical theory of sex [which] must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression”<sup>75</sup>. The thesis aims to explore the concrete mechanisms of shaping sexuality in the Romanian society (and those of oppressing it, when looking at the decades of state socialism), and the relationship between this social mechanic and cinema or, in other words, the ways in which film can be used not necessarily to create injustice or exert sexual oppression, but also to reflect and, sometimes, correct, the material and institutional power in relation to sexuality.

Teresa de Lauretis argues that “gender is (a) representation – which is not to say that it

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<sup>73</sup> Altman, Dennis. *Global Sex*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Rubin, *Thinking Sex*, 149.



does not have concrete or real implications, both social and subjective, for the material life of individuals. On the contrary, [...] the representation of gender *is* its construction”<sup>76</sup>. Is this also true of sexuality? Can the representation of sexuality (in cinema) also be, if not *the* construction of sexuality, at least a factor in shaping it? This may be the case, but then is it not also true that representation itself is constructed? And is it not even more important, then, to give equal weight to the description and the analysis of contexts, as well as to the examination of representation?

Gayle S. Rubin suggests that there has been a “cultural fusion of gender with sexuality [which] has given rise to the idea that a theory of sexuality may be derived directly out of a theory of gender”<sup>77</sup>. While recognising, as Rubin does, that “gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations”<sup>78</sup>, this project takes her differentiation between sexuality and gender as “two distinct arenas of social practice”, and focusses on the former rather than the latter. This is not because I consider one to be more important than the other, but because there seems to be a bigger gap to fill in terms of the Eastern European scholarship on sexuality (and film sexuality), understood semantically mainly, but not exclusively, as “sexual activity, lust, intercourse, and arousal”<sup>79</sup>. It is also because there is this fluidity in the concepts of sex and sexuality, which amount to a “realm” that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick thinks is “virtually impossible to situate on a map delimited by the feminist-defined sex/gender distinction”<sup>80</sup>, and which may allow for a broader (and hopefully

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<sup>76</sup> de Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Rubin, *Thinking Sex*, 169.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>80</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*, 29.

more productive) scope of exploration. For this reason, I hesitate to limit the study to a rigid definition of sex, on the one hand, and of sexuality, on the other, and prefer to go instead for Kosofsky's wider, more "plastic" understanding of both terms, as designating "the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them"<sup>81</sup>.

To this, I would also add Dagmar Herzog's understanding of (consensual) sex, which again has multiple facets, which can enrich and expand the exploration areas of this thesis. Herzog says that sex can be "many things: a site of explosive, transformative ecstasy, delight, and excitement; of serene security and tenderness; of status confirmation or the pleasures of conformity to norms; of anguished longing, vulnerability, conflictedness, insecurity, or jealousy; or of boredom and ennui, even repulsion"<sup>82</sup>. Precisely because of this complex and fluid understanding, Herzog argues that "human beings are so politically and socially manipulable in this area"<sup>83</sup>, which makes the concrete investigation of the political and social contexts all the more important.

Wilhelm Reich defines the "economy of sexuality" as "the form in which society regulates, encourages, or inhibits the gratification of the sexual drive"<sup>84</sup>. He distinguishes between the sexual economy of the individual and the sexual economy of society itself, the first always dependent on the latter. The aim of this thesis is to explore

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Herzog. *Syncopated Sex*, 1297.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Reich, Wilhelm. *Sex-Pol. Essays, 1929-1934*. London: Verso Books, 2013, 234.

the forms that this economy of sexuality takes mainly in terms of the regulation or inhibition of wider aspects of sexuality, which include, but are not limited to the gratification of the sexual drive. Reich also defines the repression of sexuality as its removal from consciousness<sup>85</sup>. But this removal from consciousness is not dissimilar to the hypothesis (derived from de Lauretis) that sexuality as its own representation is constructed (by contexts). The act of removal is integral to that of construction. Therefore, this thesis also aims to show how repression is achieved through “material and institutional power”, as well as through representation.

#### **II.4. Literature on Romanian Social Life**

This section would not be complete without an overview of the literature related to Romanian society and the transformations it went through in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The studies in this area are generally split into three sub-domains. Firstly, there are historical studies, which help understand the context we're dealing with. One of these is Dennis Deletant's history of Romania under state socialism<sup>86</sup>. It is one of the most complex, and most complete there are, together with Katherine Verdery's investigation of Romania's cultural identity during socialism<sup>87</sup>. These are complemented by other less academic, but nevertheless useful, alternative histories of Romania, such as the series of books by Lucian Boia, well known as a historian of mentalities<sup>88</sup>. Not to be neglected are also the series of research studies published by the Institute for the Investigation of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>86</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*.

<sup>87</sup> Verdery, Katherine. *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>88</sup> Boia, Lucian. *De ce este Romania altfel?*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013; Boia, Lucian. *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001; Boia, Lucian. *Mitologia stiintifica a comunismului*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011; Boia, *Romania, Borderland of Europe*.

Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile (IICCMER)<sup>89</sup>, particularly the ones that focus on aspects of privacy, and the challenges of maintaining individuality under an oppressive regime.

Secondly, there is a vast array of sociological and anthropological studies related to Romania, out of which the most relevant one to this research is perhaps Kligman's study on the anti-abortion policy of Nicolae Ceausescu<sup>90</sup>. Romanian anthropologist Vintila Mihailescu's collections of essays about urban Romania<sup>91</sup> are also a valuable resource that will shed some light on various aspects discussed in this research (even though not directly related to it, e.g. the post-rural Romanian society, youth mobility etc.). There are also a considerable amount of books focussed on the experience of women during and after communism, which partially touch upon the subject of sexuality<sup>92</sup>. David Kideckel's sociological investigation of post-socialist working class in Romania<sup>93</sup> also accounts for some interesting facts regarding sexual expectations and gender relations within the Romanian couple.

Finally, a third sub-domain of the relevant literature comprises a type of books which

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<sup>89</sup> Budeanca, Cosmin, Florentin Olteanu. *Stat si viata privata in regimurile comuniste*. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2010; Jinga, Luciana M., ed. *Identitate, social si cotidian in Romania comunista*. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*.

<sup>91</sup> Mihailescu, Vintila. *Etnografii urbane. Cotidianul vazut de aproape*. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2009; Mihailescu, Vintila. *Scutecele natiunii si hainele imparatului. Note de antropologie publica*. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Baban, Adriana, and H.P. David. *Voices of Romanian Women. Perceptions of Sexuality, Reproductive Behaviour, and Partner Relations During the Ceausescu Era*. Bethesda, MD: Transnational Family Research Institute, 1994; Cosma, Ghisela, Eniko Magyari-Vincze and Ovidiu Pecican. *Prezente feminine. Studii despre femei in Romania*. Cluj: Editura Fundatiei Desire, 2002; Gal, Susan, Gail Kligman, eds. *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>93</sup> Kideckel, David A.. *Getting By in Postsocialist Romania. Labor, the Body, and Working-Class Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.

have flourished in post-1990 Romania, which are personal essays (or memoirs, or accounts) about life under communism. While they may be considered sociologically unreliable due to their subjective nature, they do bring to light some aspects of everyday life under socialism otherwise unknown, especially in terms of cultural practices and the reception of various cultural products, including films<sup>94</sup>.

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For a cinematic tradition built mainly by and under Communism, Dyer's envisioned function of (screen) sexuality as keeping bodies in place is a fundamental definition. If one goes back to Mazierska's assumption that Communism is inherently against eroticism, and if one joins it with Kon and Riordan's suggestion that the totalitarian (Soviet) state programatically eliminated and dismissed any connection between individuals and their eroticism in order to "emasculate the individual's autonomy"<sup>95</sup>, and if one finally corroborates these thoughts with Lenin's "film is the most important art", one can clearly see why an exploration of cinematic sex in a politically repressive society is a subject worth tackling. It is, admittedly, a study of ideologies and, specifically, of certain mechanisms through which they become functional, but ultimately it's about the cogs and wheels that keep an entire nation moving, and about how this movement defines the nation itself.

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<sup>94</sup> Cernat, Paul, Ion Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, and Ioan Stanomir. *Explorari in comunismul romanesc*. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2008; Cernat, Paul, Ion Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, and Ioan Stanomir. *In cautarea comunismului pierdut*. Bucharest: Editura Paralela 45, 2001; Lungu, Dan, Amelia Gheorghita. *Carti, filme, muzici si alte distractii din comunism*, Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Kon, Igor and James Riordan, eds. *Sex and Russian Society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993, 24.





# **PART I: ROMANIA BEFORE STATE**

## **SOCIALISM**



## **Chapter III: Performing Morality. 1911-1948**

This chapter focusses on the period between the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the aftermath of the Second World War, and it aims to investigate how visible sex and sexuality were on Romanian screens, and whether there was anything that may have shaped or altered this visibility, given the fact that the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were generally quite adventurous as far as film technology, production, exhibition and representation were concerned. To do this, I look at various sources, including pamphlets and film magazines from the period, as very few of the films themselves have been preserved and are available for consultation. I do briefly aim to look at two films in more focus, one from the first part of the period covered, and one from the latter, to try and find out how the concerns around sexuality and romance changed throughout the period.

### **III.1. The Beginnings of Cinema in Romania**

#### **III.1.1. Technology: Economy, Logistics, Equipment, Stakeholders.**

Cinema arrived in Romania in 1896, five months after the Lumiere brothers had showcased the products of their new invention, the cinematograph, in Paris. The host of the Romanian event was the Bucharest-based Francophone newspaper *L'Independance Roumaine* (*The Romanian Independence*), which exhibited a selection of the Lumiere's first films on 27 May 1896. The show seems to have been long awaited. As the paper's own lifestyle columnist Claymoor (real name Misu Vacarescu, the son of a poet) writes,

it had finally arrived - “Enfin il est arrive”<sup>96</sup>. The invention was seen as a “delicatesse” which “the whole of Bucharest will rush to try and have a taste of”, according to the same source. Some Romanian newspapers such as *Drapelul (The Flag)* were quick to republish one particular French response to the possibilities of this new invention in particular, a response which has since become a film studies textbook staple, and which directly connects the new medium to love and to the human body: “When apparatuses like this are available to the public, when everyone can photograph those who are dear to them, not only their posed forms but their movements, their actions, their familiar gestures, with words at the tip of their tongues, death will cease to be absolute.”<sup>97</sup>

The Romanians seem to have initially counted on the French also in terms of production, possibly due to the fact that it was the French who had both the knowledge and the means to put the new invention into practice. The first Romanian actualities were made by Parisian-born film operator and photographer Paul Menu, who, in 1897, showcased the so-called “Romanian views”, or “Romanian scenes”, in the same Bucharest venue where the cinematograph was first exhibited. After this, the new invention was to disappear from the public eye for several years.

Its usage was not put on hold though, and new purposes were envisioned for the cinematograph, such as science and research. In fact, the Lumieres' invention also led to the emergence of the first naked bodies in Romanian cinema. Professor Gheorghe Marinescu, a neurologist, is credited (by Romanian critics, e.g. Cantacuzino, Sava,

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<sup>96</sup> Caliman, *Istoria filmului romanesc*, 9.

<sup>97</sup> *La Poste*, 30 December 1895, in Abel, Richard and Rick Altman, eds. *The Sounds of Early Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001, 8.

Caliman) with the “naturalisation” of the cinematograph in Romania. Marinescu used the newly arrived invention to observe the physical transformations in patients diagnosed with “hysterical hemiplegia”. According to Sava, Marinescu's *A Case of Hysterical Hemiplegia Cured by Hypnotic Suggestion* (September 1899) included “group scenes, with patients often filmed naked”. While one could imagine little sexual appeal about these, and while the area in which they were exhibited was strictly limited to the realms of science, this is a first well worth taking into account.

### **III.1.2. Exhibition: What / where from? Where? For whom?**

Apart from exhibiting the cinematograph for the sole purpose of advertising the new invention, films eventually ended up being part of larger and more varied spectacles, in line with what was happening elsewhere in the world. Rather than events in themselves, film screenings were just one of multiple attractions within various public entertainment programmes. Romanian critic Calin Caliman gives an example of an advertisement from the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which illustrates the fairly small role that films used to play in these shows:

“Basilescu Park, 10 Doamnei Street, daytime, evening time and even during representations, single price 30 bani per pint, 20 bani per half-pint. Thursday 5 June opening the theatre season. Comedies and French ditties. Cinematograph. Hot and cold meals. Patrician sausages and *mititei*<sup>98</sup>. Free entry.”

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98 A traditional Romanian dish, consisting of grilled rolls of mince-meat and spices.

There was a strong connection between theatrical venues and cinematographic spectacles. Once these reappeared in Bucharest, around 1905, they were showcased in spaces such as The Lyrical Theatre, but also The Sidoli Circus, where films used to alternate with Greco-Roman wrestling and horse dressage. It is also important to note that these shows should have been, at least in theory, quite accessible to the working classes. Even when exhibitors started charging for these events, a ticket wouldn't cost more than half the median daily wage for a worker. However, as briefly explained below, it is unlikely that the working class would actually spend their money to attend these shows.

The first decade of the century saw the creation and expansion of venues specifically designed for exhibiting films. In Bucharest, this happened in May 1909, on the premises mentioned in the advertisement above, which became the Volta cinema. It is worth noting that Transylvania, which at this point was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (it would only become part of Greater Romania in 1918), was a few years more advanced than the Romanian capital. For example, the Transylvanian city of Brasov had its first cinema built in 1901, followed by Cluj in 1906 (with the second built in 1907), Oradea in 1906 as well, Arad in 1907, and the smaller towns of Dej and Zalau in 1908. This was mostly dependent on how fast the technological and industrial developments made their way into these cities (since a functioning cinema relied on an electricity plant nearby), but not entirely – Timisoara, the most industrially developed city of the region at the turn of the century, only had its first cinemas built in 1908. Historian Ludovic Jordaky considers this rapid expansion of cinemas to be a phenomenon specific to Central Europe in general, even though quantitatively it was less prominent in

Transylvania. By comparison, according to Jordaky, there were about 100 new cinemas opening in Berlin in 1907 only.

### **III.2. Social Context: Economy, Education, Urban vs Rural**

While many social changes were already underway, Romanian society was, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still predominantly rural. The majority of Romanians lived in the countryside – 82% in 1912, just 3% less than in 1859. Only a few of these were landowners. Peasants were the most numerous class across the country. Access to culture and entertainment was restricted to (some) urban dwellers.

The increasing urban population had several strata as well. There was a middle class, or bourgeoisie, that came into existence during the very late 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Keith Hitchins, this was composed of “merchants and industrialists, civil servants, and professionals, especially lawyers and teachers”. On the rise, and accounting for the decrease in the rural numbers, were wage labourers, the majority of which had migrated from the countryside. The potential for the working class to constitute an audience for the new cinematographic technology was impeded by their economic and financial conditioning. Wages were barely sufficient to cover the food and housing costs, and, for this reason, entertainment was probably not high on urban workers’ priority list. Involuntarily, cinemas were therefore mostly accessible either to the gradually dwindling upper (or “noble”) class, or to the still precariously developed middle-class (or bourgeoisie).

It is also important to note here the role that the Church played in Romanian society in this period. Some changes had definitely happened by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in that there was an evident shift toward the secularization of state institutions. However, Eastern Orthodoxy remained the dominant religion, as per the 1866 Constitution. Keith Hitchins explains that “the term 'dominant' meant that the Orthodox Church had been inextricably bound up with the historical development of the Rumanian nation and was the faith of the great majority of the population” (91.5% in 1899), acting as a “bulwark of national consciousness”<sup>99</sup>.

The general Orthodox view on sexuality, still thriving today, is that it is an “inferior instinct”, and that life should be a struggle against such instincts. For example, in the book *How to Tackle the Theme of Sexuality. An Orthodox Perspective on Conjugal, Preconjugal and Extraconjugal Relations*, Greek cleric Vasilios Bacoianis states that “sexual instinct can be domesticised in order to earn God's Kingdom”, and that adhering to the Seventh Commandment is a “cure” for the body. It is equally interesting to note the difference between the phrasing of this Seventh Commandment in Romanian compared to English, for example. The Romanian equivalent of “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is “Sa nu fi desfranat”, which can have the wider meaning of “Thou shalt not be promiscuous”, and is therefore more prone to subjective interpretation. According to the Orthodox doctrine, which mirrors the wider view within Christianity, the role of instincts (including the sexual one) is purely that of ensuring survival, and the manifestations of sexuality are only accepted when their outcome leads to the perpetuation of the species. While it's highly likely that these precepts were not

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<sup>99</sup> Hitchins, *Romania*, 91.

followed by all adherents, even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this repressive morality was the dominant one, and may account for a reluctance to participate in events (such as film screenings) which could challenge the accepted mores by giving visibility to a sexuality unbound by its strictly reproductive function.

### **III.3. Film as “Art”: First Local Attempts at Theorising Cinema**

#### **III.3.1. Thematic Preoccupations**

To elaborate a discourse on sex and sexuality in early Romanian cinema is not unlike talking about the sexual habits of humans in the times of Adam and Eve. There is simply not enough “sample” to facilitate reaching clear, coherent and reliable conclusions. So many of the films made between 1911 and 1948 in Romania have been lost or destroyed, that the task of selecting relevant film texts for analysis becomes almost superfluous. Since these films have already undergone a process of selection (either natural, or caused by human error, but clearly unfortunate), the researcher's position is restricted to a commentary of the select few that survived, however relevant.

Before taking that step though, it's worth noting that, thanks to film critics of the time, we are able to get a rough idea of the preoccupation of these early films with topics of love and, subsequently, of intimacy and sexuality.

Love was one of the main themes of the first Romanian fiction film. Death was another. *Amor fatal / Fatal Love*, released in 1911, was directed by Grigore Brezeanu (who also produced *Independența României / The Independence of Romania*). The possibility of using *Fatal Love* to start a discussion on sex and sexuality is nipped in the bud, as the

film has been lost. There is also very little one can find out about it. It is allegedly based on a play that ran at the Bucharest National Theatre, but it is unclear as to what the play actually was<sup>100</sup>. The two lead actors (who can be safely assumed to play a couple in love) are Lucia Sturdza and Tony Bulandra, who got married one year after the film's release. *Fatal Love* was labelled as a "sentimental drama" by journalists of the period, and several film critics and historians have argued that this genre was easily one of the most popular during the first decades of Romanian cinema<sup>101</sup>.

Despite achieving a certain degree of popularity, the film did not seem to get support from critics, journalists and other members of the intelligentsia, which often proclaimed which themes cinema should be dealing with. Actualities were still preferred to fiction films, as they were perceived to facilitate the process of teaching national history to the masses, as well as that of promoting the country's geographical riches. In 1912, poet Victor Eftimiu read his poem "The Cinematograph" at the opening of the Clasic cinema in Bucharest. In this prologue in verse, written in the first person, Eftimiu expressed his desire to see "all our actors / dressed in ancient garments / playing the long, restless story / of our Romanian lands", and he pleaded to an invisible film producer to send a camera operator to shoot "the wonderful landscapes" of the country, so that "the world's eyes, enchanted / will then appreciate the beauty / that sleeps in the shadow of the proud Carpathians"<sup>102</sup>. The poem poses the idea of "valuable" content in counterpoint to that of financial success, which seems to be destined for melodramas, and is therefore only worthy of disdain: "I know you'll take care of the repertoire / And you won't just think

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<sup>100</sup> Modorcea, Grid. *Amorul la binea*. Galați: Editura Axis Libri, 2012, 8.

<sup>101</sup> Căliman, Sava, and Modorcea all cite an impressive number of titles referred to as „sentimental dramas”, all irremediably lost.

<sup>102</sup> Eftimiu, Victor. "Cinematograful". In Caliman, *Istoria...*, 33.



of money... / Don't give us *The Poisoned Bride* / Or *The Prince Lost Among the Gypsies*". Eftimiu even attacks *Fatal Love* directly for not standing on a high enough cultural ground: "Don't give us *Fatal Love* or other / Atrocious tales in the same tone / I suspect higher intentions / In the *Clasic* word above main door". For Eftimiu and for similar prominent intellectuals, sentimental dramas are significantly less important and of significantly less "value" to society simply because of their romantic content. The sentimental dramas are thus perceived as trivial precisely because they are sentimental.

### III.3.2. The Role of Cinema, Before and After the Great War

The 1910s witnessed even more programmatic attempts to assert the importance of cinema in educating the masses, a process in which sex and sexuality had no place. One of a few pamphlets aimed at mass distribution was *Chiemarea cinematografului. De ce trebuie să fie moral cinematograful / The Calling of the Cinematograph. Why Cinema Must Be Moral*, by Constantin Rîuleț (a police inspector) and writer George Olărașu. The authors of this booklet divide the public of Bucharest's cinemas in four categories: audiences attracted by the film's "beauty" ("beautiful in the sense known to our old ones, that is, also containing the notions of healthy and good"<sup>103</sup>), viewers looking for easy, „harmless” entertainment, audiences that wanted to educate themselves, and, more relevantly here, viewers “wanting to invigorate their dulled senses, by sitting in on ‘spicy’ films, ‘only for gentlemen and ladies’, or whatever they're called, and watching baths without... shirts, women getting dressed etc.”<sup>104</sup>. These „spicy” films seem to have been very popular indeed, according to the authors of the booklet. They condemn the

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<sup>103</sup> Rîuleț, Constantin, and George Olărașu. *Chiemarea cinematografului. De ce trebuie să fie moral cinematograful*. n.p., 1915.

<sup>104</sup> Rîuleț, *Chiemarea*, 13.

fact that audiences were literally running to see these films, “barely breathing” and “crowding at the box office”. However, audiences were often tricked into buying a ticket, as the marketing for these films was often misleading. Rîuleţ and Olăraşu claim that many film posters advertised spiciness, where in reality there would have been nothing titillating in the films themselves. To bypass the authorities though, film “merchants” sometimes did the opposite thing: they advertised productions as dealing with “noble” (or “valuable”) topics, only to cover up more indecent content. Sadly, Rîuleţ and Olăraşu fail to mention specific film titles to illustrate their point, but the relevant thing here is the way in which distributors piqued the audience’s interest in films that dealt with sex and sexuality, and also their unconventional practices to maintain this interest and to escape moral judgement:

We can say, without exaggerating much (sic), that the most raunchy and pornographic films we've watched were precisely those that didn't draw any attention to the fact that there might be something... peppery. And that's normal: when knowing himself guilty, the entrepreneur is quiet, so that he doesn't attract the attention of the authorities. He writes big words at the top of the posters that advertise immoral films, words such as: “Patriotism. Devotion. Resignation” (...). It would be convenient for him to announce that the film is spicy, but he knows the prosecutor and the police will then come running. Since that's too... spicy, that option doesn't appeal to him at all.<sup>105</sup>

One can easily see here that, already, some sort of double language was being used

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105 Rîuleţ, *Chiemarea*, 15.

around the film culture when dealing with productions susceptible of not fitting in with the socially or officially accepted behaviours. For different reasons, and in different forms, this would become a more widely spread practice later on, under state socialism and its official censorship organisations.

In parallel, the emerging discourse on the role of cinema attempted to bring together the potential aesthetic qualities of the new medium with its social function. The first such theoretical debate happened around 1911-1912. Journalists and critics started to question the relationship between theatre and film, and the latter's potential to be considered a separate art form. While most critics distinctly rejected this possibility, there were certainly voices that proclaimed and supported the artistic potential of the cinematograph. In his *Memorandum on a Cultural and Cinematographic Programme*, Leon Popescu, a young entrepreneur who would later become Romania's first film producer, defined “the cinematographic art” as “a new means of sentimental education, which happily compliments the other [arts]”<sup>106</sup>. It is important to note his use of the phrase “sentimental education”. Rather than just referring to the general “education” promoted by his predecessors, Popescu enhances the relevance of the audiences' emotional responses to cinema, in contrast with the moral outcomes envisioned by other critics.

For instance, in a pamphlet titled *The Art and the Cinematograph* (most probably published in 1913), C.T. Theodorescu saw cinema as a way to expand communication across cultures, while highlighting its direct relationship to theatre and stating its

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<sup>106</sup> Caliman, *Istoria ...*, 36.

educational role: “The cinematograph, this theatre with immediate expression, ignores borders and language difficulties, and represents the ideal means of communication between different peoples, thus constituting a factor of moral and aesthetic education”<sup>107</sup>. In line with its various uses around the globe, cinema became a powerful educational tool in Transylvania, for example, where in 1908 Revesz Mihaly pleaded for the introduction of films in schools, arguing for their potential to make teaching simpler and more effective. Few schools actually ended up using films for such purposes, mainly due to the lack of financial resource, but possibly for some other reasons. In Arad, for example, the pupils at the city’s school for girls were specifically prohibited to attend film screenings, which is perhaps a suggestion of women’s inferior social status at the time, or even (in the eyes of the authorities) of a perceived emotional fragility and susceptibility to fall under the potentially harmful spell of cinema.

A couple of decades later, the situation was very different. In June 1933, a new weekly magazine was published in the Transylvanian city of Cluj (now Cluj-Napoca). Only one issue still exists, and it is unclear whether more have been published, but what draws attention to this magazine is its title: *Sex-Appeal*. At first glance, its mission and purpose may seem ambiguous. The article on the front page celebrates three years since King Carol II ascended to throne, and is in stark contrast not just with the name of the magazine, but also with a drawing attached to the article, that of a young woman who leans nonchalantly against a bookcase, holding a note that reads “Sex Appeal”. On page 4, the aims of the magazine are made clear though: it was the creation of a group of young Transylvanians, going by the name of “The Sex Appeal League”, and it was

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<sup>107</sup> Theodorescu, C.T. *Arta si cinematografica*. Bucharest:[n.p.], 1913(?).

meant to publish “various scientific matters, episodes from the Great War, historical novels, poetry and prose, correspondences and various news, reviews, adverts etc. etc.”. Apart from just publishing the magazine, the Sex Appeal League also planned to organise two annual celebrations: one that would include “sex appeal contests”, for men and women of all ages; and another, envisioned as a trip to either a national or an international resort, where everyone present would be “cinematographed” in “entertaining roles”, cast by members of the league.

Using technology to record aesthetically pleasing bodies was innovative, certainly for Romania. The Sex Appeal team further explain: “on these trips, all league travellers will wear a costume chosen by the majority of travellers, meaning that everyone will wear similar garments, in terms of taste and beauty, so that everyone stands out with sex-appeal”. Unfortunately, it is unclear as to what specific cinematic product this would lead to, or where it would be shown. It is also not known whether anything has ever come out of this intention or not.

#### **III.4. Primitive Gender Roles in *The War of Independence***

The war film *The Independence of Romania* (Aristide Demetriade, Romania, 1912) focusses on the 1877 Russo-Turkish conflict, which earned Romania its independence from the Ottoman Empire. The film is considered to be the foundation of Romanian film production, even though it wasn't the first film made in Romania. It may be vaguely familiar to Western audiences due to *Restul e tăcere / The Rest Is Silence* (Nae Caranfil, Romania, 2007), the plot of which revolves around the making of *The Independence of Romania*. The sexual component is barely present in the 1912 film,

which is almost entirely focussed on depicting the heroism of the Romanian troops in the 1877 war.

With one exception, there are only minor hints of romantic relationships between male and female villagers. The exception is in the characters of Peneş (Aurel Athanasescu) and Rodica (Jeny Metaxa-Doro), whose incipient love story is put on hold because of the war, as Peneş enlists to fight for his country. This foreshadows something that would become very frequent in Romanian cinema under state socialism, which is the sacrifice of private happiness for the greater good, or society's best interests.

In terms of the visibility of sex and sexuality, there is barely anything here, except one kissing scene, which takes place in the first part of the film, just before Peneş leaves for battle. The performances in this scene have just enough ambiguity so as to allow for multiple interpretations of the exteriorisation of their feelings. Their eyes look up to the sky, and their hands touch their own face and chest. Alongside the large gestures and deep sighs, this can signify both a projection of future happiness (when Peneş will be safely back), but it can also be read as an expression of erotic desire, which the call to war has awakened yet, at the same time, has made impossible to fulfil. The camera itself also denies this fulfilment, as it frames the two lovers in a medium shot that lacks intimacy, particularly in conjunction with the natural daylight, and against the background of a busy village fete.

The film also reflects the patriarchal organisation of the Romanian society at the time, and reinforces the traditional differences between gender roles. For the most part, the

film is a spectacle (albeit a long-shot, static one, but still, a spectacle) of the male bodies as they march to war, ride horses, fire weapons at each other, chant and capture flags, all for the noble purpose of building a nation. After the first couple of scenes, in which they sing and dance with their men at the village fete, women are only seen again halfway through the film, either as weeping partners or as caring nurses for the wounded soldiers. As did society, the film also reduces them to the supporting role of merely looking after the more admirable male national heroes.

In summary, even though film imports in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may have been dealing in sexier themes, Romania's own productions tended to be rather timid in portraying the closeness of a couple in love, and were a reflection of a profoundly traditionalist and patriarchal morality, which set clear and impassable differences between male and female roles.

### **III.5. The Incipient Film Censorship by Way of the Hays Code**

Next, I am interested in exploring the more general impact of the American film industry on Romanian cinema in the interwar period, and the invisible connections between the birth of film censorship in Romania and the constraints of the American Motion Picture Production Code of the 1930s, or the so-called Hays Code.

In the 1920s, Romania saw the first public calls for the control, and even the censorship, of cinematic content. This happened directly under the American influence, and a few years before the actual implementation of the Hays Code. One such example was published in the *Transilvania* magazine of February 1926, under the title *The*

*Cinematographic Film as a Factor of Moral Education of Society in the United States.*

The author of the article, a Dr Sabin Manoila (who wrote the piece in Baltimore, in 1925), praises film censorship for the fact that it stops cinema, “the most powerful instrument of educating the masses”, from “being a nest of demoralisation and perversion of young elements in particular”<sup>108</sup>. While Dr Manoila's focus is on the education of American audiences in terms of inculcating a sense of justice, of right and wrong, and while he does not touch on sexual mores in particular, it is important to note how the trend toward controlling the content of films in America (which was to lead to the introduction of the MPPC Code), entered Romania without any filtering: one of the first public interventions supporting film censorship in Romania was made by a Romanian author (albeit writing from the USA), in a Romanian newspaper.

Upon discussing the relevance of censorship for American audiences, Manoila moves on to explain how crucial censorship would be for Romania, and suggests it would be even more important than for the US. Without mentioning any film titles, the author proclaims that, based on the fact that a 9-year-old boy had hanged himself in the Romanian city of Craiova, “under the influence of the cinematograph”, the introduction of film censorship is justified. Manoila continues: “We can't wait for proof that *all* spectators watching a certain film have hanged themselves. One may have *hanged* himself... another one committed *murder*, another one *stole* etc., all under the influence of the immoral film”<sup>109</sup>. Manoila also considers adultery as the ever present subject of

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<sup>108</sup> Manoila, Sabin. “Filmul cinematografic ca factor de educatie morala a societatii, in Statele Unite”. In *Transilvania*, vol. 57, no. 2 (1926), 60.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



films in Romania, though it is unclear whether he refers to imports, or to national productions. Even though he doesn't take this line of thought any further (he simply says it would be “banal” to remind readers of it), what one *can* take from it is precisely this association that he makes between adultery and the “immoral film”.

Furthermore, Manoila advocates for the creation of a central, state-controlled censorship office. He admits that his critics might say there were not enough funds to start and maintain such an office, but he counteracts this criticism by explaining that the activity of the Baltimore Board of Censors brings 15-20,000 dollars annually to the state budget<sup>110</sup>.

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) was created in 1922. It was owned jointly by film companies, and, as Kristin Thompson explains, one of its main aims was to avoid censorship from the outside. In 1930, MPPDA elaborated a self-censorship industry-wide policy, the Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code. This came about as a reaction to outside pressure from groups promoting “religious beliefs” or “children's welfare” (including the Catholic Legion of Decency), born in reaction to (in Thompson's words) “the lax morality” of the “roaring twenties”<sup>111</sup>.

The essence of the Code was found in the three principles it set out to adopt. These stated that:

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>111</sup> Thompson, Kristin. *Exporting Entertainment. America in the World Film Market, 1907-34*. London: BFI Publishing, 1985, 24.

No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.

Correct standards of life shall be presented on the screen, subject only to necessary dramatic contrasts.

Law, natural or human, should not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.<sup>112</sup>

In terms of how the Code was specifically applied, sexuality became one of the most heavily restricted themes. The Code prohibited from being explicitly treated or presented attractively themes such as adultery, passion, seduction, sex hygiene, but also scenes of dancing that emphasised “indecent movements”.

American films and the morality that most of them promoted were already in heavy demand in Romania and in the Balkans, even in the 1920s. While in the 1910s, French production companies had provided 70% of film imports in Romania, followed by the USA, with just 16%, by the 1920s American films crept into the Eastern European market, in direct competition to German productions. According to Kristin Thompson, by 1928, “American films rose to about a 50% share of the entire Balkans market, from

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<sup>112</sup> “The Motion Picture Production Code (as Published 31 March, 1930)”.  
<https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms200s/total-readings/MotionPictureProductionCode.pdf>. May 20, 2015, 2.

20 to 25% in the previous years”<sup>113</sup>, and these figures continued to grow with the introduction of sound.

Country of Origin	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
USA	20%	25%	35%	45%	60%	59.3%
Germany	30%	40%	35%	30%	20%	22.4%
France	30%	20%	10%	5%	5%	13.1%
Austria	5%	5%	10%	10%	10%	0.4%
Italy	10%	5%	5%	5%	-	0.6%
Other	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	4.2%

Table 1. Distribution of Film Imports to Romania in the Interwar Period, by Country of Origin.

The table above shows the evolution of Romanian imports by country in the 1920s. The dominance of American films by 1930 is obvious. To further strengthen this point, Thompson argues that “Romanian firms that handled no American product could ‘scarcely compete with the predominating popularity of American pictures’”<sup>114</sup>. This trend was also visible in other countries of the Eastern Europe and the Balkans. In Poland, American film imports increased dramatically, from 39.4% in 1924 to 77.9% in 1930. In Yugoslavia, they were at a constant high in a similar period, climbing from 56.5% (this figure is for 1926) to 61.5%. Only Czechoslovakia saw a dip, but this was quite minimal, from 54.8% to 51.2%.

Even though other European countries such as France or Russia had been putting film censorship mechanisms in place ever since the 1910s and 1920s, Romania did not get a

<sup>113</sup> Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 135.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

dedicated official commission for the control and censorship of films until 1934. The president of this commission was scientist and zoologist Constantin Kirițescu. In a text titled *Cinematograful în educație și învățământ* (*Cinema in Education and Teaching*), he argued for the benefits of film censorship and for its role in educating the public. In Kirițescu's opinion, cinema's social role is “to entertain by teaching, and to teach by entertaining”<sup>115</sup>. He harshly critiques the cinema industry in general, complaining about the lack of intellectual and aesthetic stature of several cinematic productions (which he doesn't name): “the film industry produces a significant quantity of films destined to satisfy the crowds' taste for the sensational and their base instincts, to excite animal inclinations, to spread unhealthy ideas”<sup>116</sup>.

Kirițescu also argues that film censorship is a necessity in all civilised states, as it enables the strengthening of the moral fibre and the integrity of society as a whole, and, ultimately, it would prevent social disorder and maintain the existing power relations:

All states take prohibition measures against a whole series of causes for the diminishing of the social powers, for the unravelling of their foundations. Why is it that the state that stops drug trafficking, that regulates alcohol, that supervises – though not as much as it should – those publications that stir disorder and immorality, why is it that the same state would hesitate when it comes to the spreading of the same causes for moral reasons, just because they rise on the lit screen in the obscurity of a cinema hall? On the contrary, because this type of

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<sup>115</sup> Kirițescu, Constantin. *Cinematograful în educație și învățământ*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească, n.d., 7.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

propagation is done on a larger scale, by more enticing means and with greater efficiency, there must be more attentive supervision, and more unforgiving prohibitive action.<sup>117</sup>

Kirițescu's argument is primarily concerned with the uneducated (or *insufficiently* educated) masses, deemed vulnerable to the seductions of the cinematographic art. After briefly discussing how witnessing violence on screen can lead audiences to violent behaviour, Kirițescu also steps into a more ethically volatile area, hinting at, but never naming, certain types of sexual behaviours and their "condemnable" qualities. He refers to the storylines of what he calls "the filmed sentimental novel[s]", which ultimately boil down to "the poor girl who, counting on her physical attractions, which she exploits at any risk, manages to make a good life for herself"<sup>118</sup>.

In support of his argument for the necessity of film censorship, the author awkwardly formulates claims meant to align Romania with the rest of the „civilised” world. While most likely accurate, he doesn't back these claims with evidence, saying simply that "most countries prohibit films in which scenes of passionate love are excessively exaggerated (sic), and they consider those that contain scenes with obvious erotic or obscene intentions – scenes that are a gross insult to chastity and mores – to be "immoral spectacle"<sup>119</sup>. The language he uses is visibly similar to the way the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America have formulated the corresponding argument in the Hays Code.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 14.

Kirițescu then mentions some of the measures that other states are taking in that respect, although the evidence he brings forth is once more quite sparse. A particularly relevant example is that of the United States legislation<sup>120</sup> against “the exaggeration of sex-appeal, drunkenness and sanguinary scenes, attitudes and gestures lacking ‘formality’<sup>121</sup>, against the exhibition of nudities and ‘evocative dances’” – again, almost word-for-word quotes from the Hays Code. Another example is “the Turkish Republic”, where censors are supposed to prohibit “those films, or portions of films, which, under the pretext of hygienic-sanitary propaganda, may be subject to scandal, as well as those films that would be better suited for scientific institutes than public halls”<sup>122</sup>. Somewhat confusingly though, Kirițescu illustrates this with a Spanish rather than a Turkish case: a film called *The Mysteries of Venus* (which I was unable to trace and identify) was allegedly rejected from exhibition by the Spanish authorities, as, “under the pretext of presenting anatomical points, this film contains photographs of the sexual organs”<sup>123</sup>. The author goes to explain that similar films have also been prohibited in Romania, although, significantly, no examples are cited.

In 1936, the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs elaborated and published an official document to regulate “the control and censorship of cinematographic films”<sup>124</sup>. This established a commission of control and censorship of films, the role of which was to

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<sup>120</sup> Kirițescu never properly references this, nor any of the other examples he brings into discussion. In this particular case, it is possible that he is referring to the Hays Code.

<sup>121</sup> Kirițescu's own quotations are, again, not referenced.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>123</sup> Kirițescu, *Cinematograful în educație*, 14.

<sup>124</sup> *Regulamentul pentru controlul și censura filmelor cinematografice*. Bucharest: Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeriile Statului, Imprimeria Centrală, 1936.

approve the distribution of “only those films that do not bring harm to the national, religious, social or moral interest”<sup>125</sup>. Logically, its role was also to reject those films that *did* bring harm to those interests, although exactly what those interests are is never actually clarified. The relationship between cinema and state was thus strengthened by the specific utterance in this document that the commission could not and would not function without representatives of the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Public Instruction<sup>126</sup>, National Defence, and Justice.

Article 6 of this document stated that any film destined to be publicly shown, whether made in Romania or imported, was supposed to be investigated and approved by the commission. The investigation and, implicitly, the decision the commission would take, affected the film itself, “the texts written or spoken during the original film”, “the written synopsis, meant to be printed onto programmes”, “the general title of the film, as well as the Romanian titles, possibly printed on the film”, “the photographs, posters and any other means of advertising the film”<sup>127</sup>. Moreover, film exhibitors were prohibited from showing a film's trailer or teaser trailer<sup>128</sup> before the film was “censored and approved by the Control Commission”.

This set of rules also distinguished between three categories of films, as follows: entertaining films, cultural and didactic films, and harmful films. The films in the first category were defined as those that “aim to entertain the public with topics inspired by

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<sup>125</sup> *Regulamentul...*, 5.

<sup>126</sup> The equivalent of what is currently the Ministry of Education.

<sup>127</sup> *Regulamentul...*, 6-7.

<sup>128</sup> Article 7, cited above, refers to “the fragmented representation, as token for announcement or advertisement” (my own approximate translation).

short stories, novels, plays, special cinematographic scripts etc.” and whose content, on the one hand, “does not have any of the infirmities” of harmful films, “nor does it meet, overall, the necessary criteria” to qualify them as cultural and didactic films. This second category included films that contributed to the general education of the public, by both means and content, such as historical, geographical or ethnological films, films to popularise science and technology, films with special educational aims (e.g. economy, sports, artistic taste, but also “social hygiene and prevention”), national and international news, as well as “cinematographic adaptations that bring together artistic execution with a moral or instructive content”. Finally, harmful films were defined as being those that “by the way in which they expose real or fictional life, or by the way images are linked together, may contribute to perverting the spectators and constitute propaganda (even involuntary) for actions damaging public order”<sup>129</sup>.

The regulation of this final category of films also created a powerful link between the political and the sexual, given that themes related to these two areas were specifically taken into account. Article 21 detailed not just political subcategories of harmful films<sup>130</sup>, but also dealt with films representing “actions that include pornographic scenes, obscene episodes of taverns<sup>131</sup> or whorehouses, scabrous images of debauchery and vice, and, generally, any sequences that may offend the moral attitudes of society or the stable disciplines of the family” (the idea of the family was also clearly articulated

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<sup>129</sup> *Regulamantul...*, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Various “harmful” topics are included here, such as “political actions against public and social order”, “actions hiding propaganda against the being, unity and integrity of the State, or against its political and moral bases”, “episodes that may bring harm to the honour of our People or that (...) may bear conflicts with other States”, “scenes that may weaken our Nation's trust in its energies and abilities, in the rulers of the State”, or “topics that would diminish and mock the fundamental State institutions, by being ironic or insulting toward the Monarchy, Church, Justice, Army or School System”, *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> The Romanian term (*tavernă*) describes a poor, dirty and dark public house.



in the Hays Code)<sup>132</sup>. All harmful films were to be denied approval, i.e. they'd be effectively banned from being shown or distributed anywhere, in any form.

Somehow naturally, the control of the above commission extended to encapsulate all written texts within or adjoining a film, as well as its promotional texts and images.

What stands out as relevant is the commission's right to eliminate any texts or titles with “equivocal or inappropriate meanings”<sup>133</sup>, “with scabrous or obscene nuances”<sup>134</sup>.

Apart from these general guidelines imposed on films, and affecting all categories of the population, the commission had a particular concern for “protecting the youth”. Thus, Article 69 of the above document prohibited cinema owners from allowing children and teenagers under the age of 16 to see “regular screenings”, instead only permitting their access to film programmes consisting of cultural films and some entertaining films that would pose “no danger” to the youth<sup>135</sup>.

The relationships between the early Romanian film censorship system and the Hollywood self-censorship policy are evident, in terms of timeline, articulation and industry dominance. These relationships also point to the idea of a “colonial morality” being born and promoted through the dominant American imports in the interwar period. It could also be argued that this would inadvertently pave the way, in the next few decades, for a different, though in certain aspects quite similar, type of sexual morality (similarly restrained when not invisible, focussed on social productivity),

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<sup>132</sup> *Regulamentul...*, 11.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>135</sup> *Regulamentul...*, 19.

which was the one promoted by the socialist regime, a different type of coloniser in the 1950s.

### **III.6. Foreign Film Stars as Objects of Desire in the 1940s**

In the 1940s, more open views on sex in cinema became apparent. In February 1941, the popular magazine *Cinema* praised the virtues of the cinematic eros, and presented its readers with “6 New Pairs of Lovers on the Screen”. In reality, the article only contained references to four such pairs, all made famous, according to the anonymous author, by German cinema. These were: Zarah Leander and Willy Birgel (“you saw this wonderful pair in *The Heart of a Queen*, where he was Lord Bothwell and she the unhappy Queen of Scotland, Mary Stuart”<sup>136</sup>), Maria Röck and Will Quadflieg (“the film *Kora Terry* showed them together for the first time... the film *Kora Terry* made them famous... it is German cinema's no. 1 lovers' couple”<sup>137</sup>), Olga Cehova and Karl Ludwig Diehl (“sometimes the love between middle-aged people is stronger, more passionate than young love”<sup>138</sup>), and, finally, Hilde Krahl and Gustav Fröhlich (“a pair that, by making itself perfect, started many envies and intimate conflicts”<sup>139</sup>).

According to the author, by this point cinema had reached “technical perfection”, and once that happened, “it only wanted to depict the real life, which we all live”<sup>140</sup>. For this reason, cinema “had to embrace love, as it is one of the small parts that make up life”.

The anonymous author continues: “Indeed, what is a man's life sometimes, but one

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<sup>136</sup> “6 noui perechi de amanti ai ecranului”. *Cinema*, vol. XVIII, no. 519 (1941): 12.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

love? How many don't willingly give [life] up because of an unrequited love, which most of the times represents the shattering of any purpose to live?"<sup>141</sup>. It is not only cinema that can make viewers take their own lives (as per Dr Manoila's 1926 article), but love as well, and sometimes the two worked together to give birth to suicidal thoughts in their viewers' minds. A letter sent to *Cinema* by a reader named Ionel Puscariu, and published in the same issue under the title *Ann Sheridan, a Danger for the Youth*, details the attraction that film stars could have on film fans, leading to visceral, physiological responses in them. It is worth reprinting the (translated) letter in full:

I'm not an enemy of this celebrity. On the contrary; I'm perhaps her most enthusiastic admirer. For this precise reason I bring to your attention my opinion that exhibiting her films in our country should not be permitted anymore, her presence on screen constituting a true public danger... more so for the youth. I am past teenage – I'm 24 years old – and still I confess that after I saw her last film, “You're an Angel”, I didn't eat for three days and I couldn't sleep for three nights because of my obsession for her face, not to mention her body. Do not think I'm joking. Everything I write is true. I'm making it my duty to signal this fact to young people. Now I believe what you once wrote, which was that in America a lot of spectators killed themselves because of movie stars.

Ionel Puscariu<sup>142</sup>

While this is indeed just one type of response to cinema, it is nonetheless relevant, as it speaks about the impact that the sexual attractions of film and film stars can have on a

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Puscariu, Ionel. “Ann Sheridan, un pericol pentru tineret”. *Cinema*, vol. XVIII, no. 519 (1941): 2.

public without much experience in visual media. One can also speculate that the physiological appeal of film stars compensates for, or fills a gap in, the precarious modes of understanding (and responding to) one's own erotic desires.

Going back to the “6 New Pairs of Lovers on Screen”, it is interesting to note the author's praise of the German film industry in relation to depicting love on screen. The authors consider that, for German producers, love is of great importance and, because of that, “whenever they depicted it on film, they used sincerity rather than false shyness”<sup>143</sup>. “They've never faked it in the studio, which could have meant stealing its charm, its passion, and all its wonderful paradoxes... They've also never trivialised this sacred feeling”<sup>144</sup>, the article continues. This both acknowledges and encourages the perceived opposition between eroticism and love as, on the one hand, raw and natural, and, on the other, as spiritual or superior.

There is little evidence to suggest that German cinema of the 1930s and 1940s is more preoccupied with love and romance than the cinema of other European countries. This may lead one to speculate that *Cinema's* crush on German films (in this article in particular, but in many others in the early '40s) reflected a more widespread pro-German sentiment in Romania, which supported the Axis in the Second World War, until 1944.

In 1942, the same magazine published an article titled *The Erotic Film*, and subtitled *Will justice finally be made for this persecuted genre?*, in which the unnamed author

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<sup>143</sup> 6 noui perechi de amanti ai ecranului.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

attempted to defend films such as *Ekstase / Ecstasy* (Gustav Machaty, Czechoslovakia, 1933)<sup>145</sup>, controversial at the time of its release because of Hedy Lamarr's nude scenes. In their argument, this Romanian writer, whoever it is, diminishes the impact of eroticism in the film and tries to move the focus onto its educational role. The author thinks that “the cinephile masses realised that the respective production had intended not to speculate triviality, but to debate a physiology issue of the purest educational and, therefore, moral essence”<sup>146</sup>. It is also interesting to note how the erotic film genre is characterised in this article – it is seen as being “based on aesthetics, beauty and physiology, this younger brother of the common film was encompassing both pure art and dynamism”. However brave taking the side of erotic film is, the use of terms such as the clinical “physiology” or the ambiguous “dynamism”, as well as placing the genre outside the “common film”, still demonstrate a certain kind of awkwardness in elaborating a discourse on eroticism in cinema in those years.

### **III.7. Interwar Urbanity and Ambiguous Sexual Behaviour**

By the end of the period analysed in this chapter, attitudes toward sex and sexuality in the wider society changed, under the influence of economic development and the increasing urbanisation of Romania. I will briefly look at how sexual morality in the environment of the city was represented as somewhat more complex, and certainly more ambiguous than the traditionalist one depicted in *The War of Independence*.

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<sup>145</sup> Funnily enough, this was improperly referred to as *Extrase*, which in Romanian means “extracts” or “extracted”.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

*Visul unei nopți de iarnă / A Winter Night's Dream* (Jean Georgescu, Romania, 1946) is a romantic story that focusses on a young jewellery shop assistant, Maria Panait (Ana Colda), and her romantic crush, novelist Alex Manea (George Demetru), after they meet on New Year's Eve. Alex invites Maria to spend the night at his place, despite only having talked briefly in Maria's shop. The tension between the social and the erotic comes into play again, in an unexpectedly dark manner though. After Maria falls asleep on Alex's sofa, Alex goes to a party with his official lover, Elvira (Sanda Simona). Cristian (Nicolae Motoc), one of Elvira's (male) friends, drops by Alex's house, and informs the butler that he's going to wait for Alex to come back. A medium shot sees the visitor enter the room where Maria sleeps. Framed against the open door, he stops to look at what's in front of him, then he closes the door on the camera.

A cut moves the scene to the next morning. The viewer is left with an uncomfortable sensation that something inappropriate if not violent, most likely of a sexual nature, has happened in the room overnight. This sense of uneasiness is enhanced by the chiaroscuro lighting, as well as by one of Maria's lines – "I don't know whether I was dreaming or not, but it was the best night of my life", which adds further mystery to the off-screen encounter. As the plot progresses, it becomes clear that Maria thinks she spent the night with Alex. So does her family: they all agree that, because she spent the night at a man's house, Maria has compromised both their reputation, and herself. The incessant allusion to a sexual encounter, without this fact ever being spelled out though, is representative of the tension between visibility and secrecy surrounding the sexual act. The constant teasing makes it become more powerful than by actually showing the scene. In this respect, the film does have things in common with the best screwball

comedies of Hollywood's golden age, though there are rarely comedic moments in this uneven film.

In the meantime, Alex becomes convinced that Cristian had assaulted Maria, and he asks the young girl to marry him, a gesture intended to protect her from the infamy brought by trampling societal conventions. On the day of the wedding, Elvira, now merely Alex's friend rather than his lover, informs him that nothing happened between Cristian and Maria, other than "a simple kiss": Cristian would not be the type of person to commit "such an impoliteness with a shop girl". The choice of the word "impoliteness" to indicate sexual intercourse is once more symptomatic of the tense relationship between the private and the social, since politeness generally refers to one's public conduct, and is usually governed by a set of well-established conventions. The sexual act is thus seen as opposed to one's acceptable behaviour in society, and in this respect the film can be interpreted as reinforcing the conventionally patriarchal attitudes of the time.

Furthermore, Alex confesses he would be even happier to marry Maria, now that he knows nothing happened between her and Cristian. This betrays a previously repressed desire of marrying an untouched, sexually pure young girl, which is characteristic of rural Romania, and of patriarchal societies in general. Therefore, the subversive quality of the filmmaking, in terms of dealing with the theme of sexuality, becomes subverted itself by a traditionalist resolution and a rather reactionary characterisation, hidden under the guise of a romantic happy-end.

### **III.8. Chapter Conclusion**

In the first part, the study has found that, prior to state socialism, visibility was not really an issue as far as representing sex and sexuality are concerned, although tensions did arise between this natural, unfiltered manner of dealing with erotic matter on-screen, and a pro-regulatory discourse put forward by Romanian critics and lawmakers, mirroring events in the Western world. The vast majority of films produced in Romania during this period revolved around matters of the heart and the pursuit of erotic accomplishments, often in contrast with the dominant morality, on which the Orthodox Church had an overwhelming regulatory influence. A predominantly rural society at the time, Romania only had cinemas in the very few urban areas, which meant the impact of the “sentimental dramas” was perhaps less significant in terms of what they could do to challenge the traditional morality.

The study also brought forth several examples of critical interventions from the period, to demonstrate how these went about further dwindling, or minimising the liberating potential of dealing with erotic themes in the first decades of cinema in the region. Certain voices of authority even went as far as to call for a strict regulation of not just films produced in Romania, but also of the increasing number of imports, in terms of their alleged sexual explicitness and therefore their “immorality”, which was thus put in direct opposition to the accepted mores. Restricting visibility was therefore pretty straightforward: these were attempts to censor sexuality, but not to change its meaning.

Focussing on the latter part of this period, i.e. the interwar years, I have argued that the



first state-sanctioned censorship laws and institutions came about by way of these public voices calling for tighter regulation. I have also speculated that the American Hays Code and its principles could have travelled transnationally to inspire and model these public interventions. I conclude that the relationships between the early Romanian film censorship system and the Hollywood self-censorship policy, in terms of timeline, articulation and industry dominance, point to the idea of a “colonial morality”, which would inadvertently pave the way for the evasive treatment of sexuality characteristic of films during state socialism.

**PART II: ROMANIA DURING STATE  
SOCIALISM**

## **Chapter IV: Cinema and Sexuality under Stalinist Precepts**

This chapter moves forward to examine the period between the end of the Second World War and the end of the following decade, during which Romania underwent some of the most traumatic socio-political changes in its history, brought by the division of Europe and Romania's fall under the Soviet sphere of influence. I aim to investigate the ways in which the Soviet ideology, which transformed all state institutions without exception, impacted the visibility of sex and sexuality on Romanian screens, and the extent to which both ideology and political control infiltrated filmmaking and filmic representations. To do this, I will explore the Soviet context and the ideological lines relevant to this study, as well as the socio-political context of 1950s Romania, before moving on to analyse how this colonising ideology translated to Romanian films, and how it used sexuality to impose a new kind of morality, on the one hand, and to attack opposing views, on the other.

### **IV.1. State Socialism. The Rejection of Individuality and the Prioritisation of Community**

As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, I would like to briefly discuss Zinoviev's theory of the socialist state and its influence on its citizens, particularly as far as privacy and intimacy are concerned. I talk about it at length in this chapter, as it is in this first decade of state socialism that the mutations which Zinoviev theorises had their foundation, before making a mark throughout the whole history of state socialism, and leaving scars long after its downfall.

Zinoviev works extensively with the concepts of *commune* and *communality*, which can be equated to those of *collective* and *collectivity* (these last two should be more familiar to Romanians). In this respect, they are meant to designate the social unit, which, under state socialism, is no longer the individual, but a group of individuals, the size of which is not measurable, and, therefore, due to this ambiguity in defining it, could be (and actually was) used in a discretionary manner.

In socialist societies, the collective became the sole purpose of any individual's existence and it is, therefore, no surprise if the individuals ceased to be in touch with their individuality, with their most intimate and autonomous drives, feelings and thoughts, with the consciousness of the fact that they were, among other things, sexual beings as well:

For the vast majority of society's active members [...] life is basically all that they do in the collective, for the collective and through the collective. This communal life is reflected in all other bits and pieces of their lives; it dominates them; it paints them in its own colours. It has an overwhelming influence on the lives of the members of their families. [...] For this vast majority, then, it is not the case that they go to work in a primary collective in order to earn the means to a genuine life when they have finished work. In the event, exactly the opposite turns out to be the case; life outside the collective is geared to life inside the collective. Collective life is the real life and life outside is only a condition of life inside. The collective takes not only the best out of them physically, it takes their soul as well. The commune takes people in their entirety, squeezes all the physical and spiritual

juice out of them and chucks them out afterwards on to the street and into private life as exhausted, drained, bad-tempered, bored and empty husks.<sup>147</sup>

According to this view, state socialism aimed to erase any distinction between private and public life – or, rather, the erasure of private life altogether, achieved by turning the private into public. It is therefore not difficult to understand why, for Eastern European communist regimes, the fundamental trait of pleasure in sexual activity was to be taken away, in order for the economic aspect of reproduction to expand. The Romanian regime was particularly keen to implement the Soviet stance on these issues, as historians such as Dennis Deletant<sup>148</sup> and Lucian Boia have argued. According to Boia, because Romania was the only country in Eastern Europe to abolish satellite parties, it ended up “resembling the Soviet Union” most closely, “down to small details”<sup>149</sup>.

Speaking further about “the intimate life of the collective”<sup>150</sup>, Zinoviev refers to its extension into the individuals' social activity and interpersonal relations. Because of this, individual identity, in which sexuality and sexual activity play a crucial part, was became meaningless, through the creation of a “super-personality of Communist society”<sup>151</sup>.

This is very important if one wants to understand everything that goes on in Communist society. There, let me emphasize, the bearer of personality is from the

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<sup>147</sup> Zinoviev, Alexander. *The Reality of Communism*. London: Paladin Books. 1985, 142.

<sup>148</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*.

<sup>149</sup> Boia, *Romania, Borderland of Europe*, 117.

<sup>150</sup> Zinoviev, *The Reality of Communism*, 154.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

start not the individual but the whole institution. The individual is only a bit of a personality, a feeble claim to personality, a protest against non-personality, is merely a memory of what personality used to be. It is not the individual who is the precious subject of law and morality in this society, but only the institution, itself separate, whole and autonomous in its activity; it is the only real individual.<sup>152</sup>

In other words, while the erasure of private life was accomplished by equating it to public life, this happened in parallel with a process by which public (or communal) life gained private attributes, and institutions became almost a replacement for individuals. The socialist institutions cannot have a sexuality though, they cannot experience sexual desire, nor can they relate to other institutions in a sexual way. Since, in state socialism, individuals became only components of a bigger personality, they were easier to stifle, to repress, and, if necessary, to be pinpointed as an anomaly in the otherwise well-rounded collective personality. In later years, for example, under Ceausescu's rule, "individual rights did not form part of public or private discourse"<sup>153</sup>. Zinoviev points out that only the institution was the subject of law and morality. I see that assertion differently. The individual remained that subject, but the institution became the reasoning behind the law and morality. It was the institution that had to be preserved as such. For this to happen, the individual was subjected to the legal and moral discourse created by the functioning of these institutions. In socialist Romania, it was everyone's responsibility to ensure the institutions were protected. This gave birth to a culture of mutual spying, whose purpose was higher than the right to individuality. In this way of thinking, if every man was "one of us", then every man's business was everyone's

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*, 6.

business; or, as Zinoviev puts it, “there is nothing left in the intimate life of the man which is unknown to the collective, from the condition of his bowels to his love affairs”<sup>154</sup>.

## IV.2. The Soviet Context in Cinema

In June 1948, the Romanian film industry was nationalised and reorganised based on a Soviet model. Production companies, cinemas, and film printing and developing facilities became a property of the state. The Romanian government initiated the creation of a mixed Romanian-Soviet organism, meant to enhance the development of the national film production, on the one hand, as well as the distribution of Soviet films, on the other. This project was the basis for a Soviet-oriented film industry, which would go on to function under these guidelines until the 1960s. The Soviet influence and support was not only logistical (through the deployment of artistic cadre, technical staff, and machinery), but also ideological. In a 1949 document titled *The Noble Duty of Filmmakers*, the Romanian Workers Party (which later became the Romanian Communist Party) praised the social engagement of Soviet cinema, and implicitly set an ideological direction for Romanian films. Filmmakers were encouraged to work under “the light of Lenin and Stalin's great ideas”<sup>155</sup>. There was even an inventory of Soviet film characters that could become “friends” for Romanian viewers. “The leading steel worker and the modest female country teacher, the brave Soviet aviator and the renowned patriot scientist, the kolkhoz workers from Kuban and the young heroes from Krasnodon, authentically depicted on screen”<sup>156</sup> – these were the ethical and economic

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>155</sup> Popescu, *Filmul surd*, 80.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

models that Romanian filmmakers were supposed to work towards.

This was of course just a continuation of the ideas put forward by A.A. Zhdanov, the Soviet official responsible for the implementation of the Resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party in September 1946. Zhdanov's proposal of the direction that Soviet films should take had been made apparent since May 1941, when, at a conference for film industry workers, he strongly advised filmmakers to get to know the realities of Soviet life better. The Soviet state had been interfering with the content and the themes of films since the 1920s, but the degree of interference increased during and after the Second World War, to specifically include aspects of eroticism on film. Peter Kenez references an anecdote which Soviet filmmaker Grigori Aleksandrov told Zhdanov in the context mentioned above:

When comrade Stalin saw *Volga, Volga*<sup>157</sup>, he commented that the first kiss should be cut. Comrade Dukel'skii [at the time head of the Film Committee] decided that kissing is a dangerous business, and whenever kissing appeared he thought that there was no need to show it, but it definitely had to be cut. The Deputy of Dukel'skii, Comrade Burianov told me that it will be for the best if we cut all kissing. I asked him whose decision was it? He looked at me meaningfully and said that this was not his opinion. Ostensibly this is Comrade Stalin's opinion, Comrade Zhdanov's opinion, but I am sure that this is not your opinion, but Dukel'skii's.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Volga - Volga* (Grigoriy Aleksandrov, USSR, 1938).

<sup>158</sup> Kenez, Peter. *Cinema and Soviet Society. From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001, 166.



The ambiguity of the decisions mentioned in Aleksandrov's story is relevant for the creation of a simulated morality, at least if one thinks about Foucault's two components of morality: the imposed codes of behaviour and the so-called modes of subjectivation (“the way in which the individual establishes his relationship to the rule”<sup>159</sup>). This morality is simulated because, while the two components may (and often do) develop independently from each other, they cannot really function together in this particular context. The codes of behaviour lack a proper foundation and specificity, and there is also an ambiguity in the modes of subjectivation themselves (since filmmakers had to determine what kind of films they should make “by trial and error”, as Kenez puts it).

The Resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party of September 1946 later became a mould for the functioning of Romanian cinema. It found three ways of attack against one specific film<sup>160</sup>, which can apply more broadly to the whole Soviet film industry, and which implicitly provide new directions, or codes of behaviour. One in particular is relevant to this study: the criticism that *A Great Life* focussed too much on individual experiences to the detriment of social problems. “In other words, a Soviet artist was not to be distracted by private concerns, such as love, jealousy or death”<sup>161</sup>, Kenez explains. In Romania, this was to become a central idea in the arts (including cinema) – not just throughout the so-called “cultural Stalinism” or “proletkult” period up until the 1960s, but until the end of the socialist regime in 1989. This ideological direction forced on-screen sex and sexuality to be dealt with minimally,

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<sup>159</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2. The Use of Pleasure*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1976], 12.

<sup>160</sup> *A Great Life / Bolshaya zhizn* (Leonid Lukov, USSR, 1939).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

and only as long as connections to wider social problems could be made through them.

### **IV.3. New beginnings**

One of the priorities of the newly installed Communist regime was a complete break with the past. This manifested itself in many forms, political, social, and cultural.

Members of historical political parties were hunted down, arrested, and incarcerated for their political beliefs. Economically, one of the immediate priorities was the collectivisation of agriculture, during which the whole social structure in rural areas was to be turned upside down, and wealthy peasants (or “chiaburs”) became the enemy of the new order (with fates similar to those of the political opponents). By 1948, 90% of the economy became nationalised, including film production and film distribution. The press was now entirely state-owned, according to the 1952 Constitution. Culturally, any connections with capitalist Western Europe were cut, and the educational system was reorganised according to a Soviet model. The study of Russian language in schools became compulsory. The Romanian Academy was replaced by a simulacrum obedient to Soviet standards, and over 10,000 books were officially prohibited from publication between 1946 and 1949. Intellectuals and artists who had been prominent before 1946, or who did not adhere to the new state-sanctioned ideology, were sent to prison or, in the best of cases, marginalised from public life.

On the other hand, people with very little connections to the old regime were given official preferential treatment in most areas of public life. Poor peasants and members of the working class in particular, because of their “healthy origins” (a term informally coined by the newly powerful Communists), became the favoured classes. Special

places were created for them in universities, and they were promoted in decision-making roles almost indiscriminately, regardless of levels of competence. Official state propaganda also made sure to antagonise members of these classes against those that were already feeling the repressive effects of the regime. Fomenting class struggle, or class war, became one of the main strategies meant to legitimise and strengthen the Communist rule. According to Kligman and Verdery, “class war was crucial to creating the socialist body politic” and provided a framework for a so-called “politics of difference”, characterised by “resignifying familiar persons, practices, and everyday language in new ways”<sup>162</sup>. As I will show later in the chapter, this reconfiguration of “persons, practices and language” was clearly visible in cinematic terms, and moreover it involved sexuality as a primary component.

In terms of the actual film industry, the bleakness of these real-life conflicts contrasted with the image that the changes in the film industry were meant to convey. *Rasuna valea / The Valley Resounds* (Paul Calinescu, 1950), the first film made under the auspices of the Communist regime, was perceived as a “happy” and “beautiful” beginning of the new Romanian cinema. Film critics adhering to the new official state line now deemed the pre-war film output as “embarrassing” and “an immense zero”. They accused it as having been driven by purely commercial reasons, and films that included romantic comedies or melodramas<sup>163</sup> were demonised and labelled as “horrors”. Such titles were incriminated for “falsifying life”, for “staying away from the

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<sup>162</sup> Kligman, Gail and Katherine Verdery. *Peasants under Siege. The Collectivisation of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, 324.

<sup>163</sup> For example, the now disappeared *The Lady on the Second Floor / Doamna de la etajul II* (Dezso Major, Romania, 1937) or even *The Lovers' Forest / Padurea indragostitor* (Cornel Dumitrescu, Romania, 1946).

interests and the spiritual requirements of masses”<sup>164</sup>; they were alleged to have been against the “aspirations” of the masses, and they “[bear] within them the poison of bourgeois decadence, promoting some star launched by capitalists as well as the lazy life of the bourgeoisie”<sup>165</sup>. The discourse regarding the needs of the new society, and the role that cinema was meant to play in it, while not new itself, took an aggressive turn toward promoting the educational and “inspirational” purpose of film, which had to become dominant over the entertainment value and over financial profit.

The concept of *socialist realism*, borrowed from the Soviets, was applied onto the whole of the cultural and artistic output of the new regime, both in terms of content and in terms of aesthetics. According to Radu, no cultural artefact was “accepted” that “deformed the real, by demoralising and confusing the simple man in cities or villages”, particularly “eroticism, entertainment, adventure novels or policier novels”<sup>166</sup>. This was fairly understandable in the context of both “cultural Stalinism” and the repressive nature of the Soviet-modelled Romanian government, at least if we think about it in terms of Giddens' ideas regarding “the democratising of personal life”<sup>167</sup>. If it is true, as Giddens argues, that the possibility of intimacy means the promise of democracy, it is equally true that the impossibility of intimacy (or of the representation of intimacy) denies any promise of democracy. Reversing the terms of the argument, the absence of democracy (inherent to this new authoritarian regime) refused the possibility of intimacy.

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<sup>164</sup> Popescu, *Filmul surd...*, 121.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Radu, *Institutiile culturale in tranzitie*, 64.

<sup>167</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.

To illustrate how these complex tensions between class, power and sexuality worked through the medium of film in 1950s Romania, I will further look in more detail at some examples from the era: *In sat la noi / In Our Village* (Jean Georgescu, Victor Iliu, 1951), a purely propagandistic film mixing the promotion of collectivisation with issues of sexual choice; *Pe raspunderea mea / On My Responsibility* (Paul Calinescu, 1956), an urban romantic comedy set in a successful textile factory; and *La moara cu noroc / The Mill of Good-Luck* (Victor Iliu, 1957), a critically praised adaptation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel dealing with passion and sin in a rural setting. I have chosen these three films as they illustrate three slightly different periods within the 1950s: a more repressive one between 1948 and 1953; another in which the propagandistic control becomes slightly looser, between Stalin's death in 1953 and the Hungarian revolt in 1956; and the third, a period of rejuvenated repression, which lasted until the end of the decade.

#### **IV.4. *In Our Village*: Freedom of Choice and Female Empowerment?**

After directing some successful films in both Romania and France during the third, fourth and fifth decade of the century, including the previously discussed *A Winter Night's Dream* (1946), Jean Georgescu turned toward socialist-realist propaganda with *In Our Village*, released in 1951.

*In Our Village* tells the individual stories of various members of a rural community which finds itself in the midst of collectivisation. In the purest socialist realist style, the film argues for the benefits of collectivisation in a direct and unambiguous language, completely distanced from the characters who speak this language. The film style is

very straightforward, and strictly functional rather than expressive. In this incipient socialist-realist period, propaganda functions mainly through words, and any subtleties of film language are avoided, in order to hammer the message home. The analysis therefore focusses on characterisation, dialogue and plot. Two families stand out from the semi-anonymous cast of characters: hardworking peasant Pantelimon (Vasile Lazarescu) and his equally hardworking daughter Leana (Valentina Cios), on the one hand, and chiabur Scapau (Aurel Ghitescu) with his aggressive son Dumitru (played by a very young Liviu Ciulei, later to become a Palme d'Or winning director for *Padurea spanzuratilor / The Forest of the Hanged*, in 1965). Pantelimon's wish is for his daughter to wed Scapau's son, but Leana has no eyes for dark-eyed olive-skinned Dumitru, instead spending most of her time with fair-haired lean Mihaila (Andrei Codarcea), an employee of Scapau and a fervent supporter of the cause of collectivisation.

From the very start of the film, Pantelimon is dissatisfied with Leana hanging out with Mihaila. He expresses his dissatisfaction to his wife, complaining that “the girl won't listen to [him]”. The translation of this phrase is not as impactful as its Romanian original, which can also have the meaning of “the girl won't obey me” (one piece of advice that Romanian adults always give children, even nowadays, is for them to “listen to their mother and father”, i.e. obey their parents). This tradition of children doing what their parents want them to do is already undermined by this (for now just spoken) disobedience on Leana's behalf. This may signal both the emancipation of women under Communism, and the emergence of a new model of social behaviour, through Leana's association with the communist sympathiser Mihaila. The new beginnings in Romanian

society are clearly marked in this film through this act of rebellion.

Oddly enough, the female character's right to choose her beloved is asserted not by herself, but by old man Lepadatu (Constantin Ramadan), the voice of traditional wisdom, but also a character who is unambiguously on the side of collectivisation. While talking with the girl's reluctant father, Lepadatu advises him to "let the girl choose whoever she fancies", as "in the collective, another life awaits for the young". While Leana confidently and repeatedly demonstrates her preference for Mihaila, throughout the film it is mainly men who scheme in the background and plan to derail the girl's fate. After Leana's father refuses to join the collective, a disappointed Mihaila confesses to her father Pantelimon that he had hoped he would join the collective, so that he would "give" Leana to him. Once more, the amorous future is dependant not on an autonomy of feeling, but on political participation. Mihaila considers the only solution is to "steal" the girl, which again hints at the female character being objectified and readily appropriated by the virile communist. In turn, Lepadatu confesses he too had stolen his wife, but as opposed to being a virtuous fighter for a political cause, he was "a sinner". His character is therefore construed as a model for audiences to follow, and also speaks to the unchanging face of patriarchy under state socialism: even though the old man and the young activist might have had differing political opinions, the bond between the old and the new is created not just by the old repenting against their ways, but also by their similarly regressive attitude toward women and relationships, portrayed as a desirable trait of socialist masculinity.

By comparison, Dumitru, the son of the chiabur, is depicted as being violent and a

complete slave of his passion for Leana, which in addition to his social status diminishes his degree of political involvement. In a scene toward the beginning of the film, he almost rapes Leana, but does not forget to stress his abjection when he asks her whether he had disgusted her. “I'm not sick of *you*, Leana”, he then adds, declaring not his love or what she makes him feel, but what she does *not*. The attempted rape is heroically prevented when Mihaila appears seemingly out of nowhere and saves Leana. While in this scene, the balance of power is clearly in the favour of Dumitru, due to his superior social status over Mihaila, who is just a worker in Dumitru's father's service, once the collectivisation gains momentum, this balance dramatically shifts and, in another confrontation between the two, Dumitru is punched to the ground after suggesting having sexual intercourse with Leana once they get married: “Did Leana tell you she liked you?”, Dumitru asks Mihaila. “Never mind, I like her. What else do you need? She'll really like it after the wedding”, Dumitru provocatively tells Mihaila before getting punched. Once more, it is the antagonist that gets associated with sexuality, while the collectivisation activist is designed to re-establish morality, albeit through violence.

While, in a romantic context, Leana is being treated as unable to make her own decision, leaving it to the men to decide for her, in a political context the emancipation of women seems to be clearly encouraged. Other women villagers are usually the ones pushing their husbands to join the collective, and men are ridiculed when they don't allow their wives to join. “He wants women to stay slave to the man”, one of these awakened females accuses her husband of, during a meeting on collectivisation in the village hall, which results in the man being banished from this meeting. Furthermore,



another village woman called Maria (Nana Ianculescu) becomes, later in the film, the villagers' candidate for the position of president of the collective. Once more, there are male voices objecting to this ("She won't be able to do it, she's a woman!"), but they are quickly brought to silence by other more supportive men. These other male voices praise Maria not just for being hardworking and worthy of the position, but also for being "as brave as a man". This speaks about the perceived inferiority of women in the traditional Romanian society, but is also an illustration of the masculine standards (of bravery, hard work and determination) that even women are supposed to aspire to.

#### **IV.5. *The Mill of Good Luck: An Aesthetic Peak, but No Subversion***

##### **Here**

*Moara cu noroc / The Mill of Good Luck* is the adaptation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel by Ioan Slavici, set in rural Transylvania. It tells the story of Ghita (Constantin Codrescu), a former cobbler, who gives up his life in a rural community to become an inn-keeper. Having moved his entire family in the wilderness, he becomes acquainted with Lica (Geo Barton), a pig shepherd, who quickly makes Ghita an involuntary accomplice to his illicit business practices. By the time Lica and his men commit a murderous robbery, Ghita and his wife Ana (Ioana Bulca) are already too deep in their professional and personal relationship with the pig shepherd to be able to get out of it intact.

Over the decades, the film has received constant critical acclaim. In 1957, it was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and in more recent years it has been voted by Romanian critics as one of the ten best Romanian films of all time. Generally, the praise has been addressing the stylistic and aesthetic qualities of the film

(quite rightly), but also the film's "striking" departure from the unashamedly propagandistic cinematic products of the era. While this would appear to be true, I argue that, in effect and by way of contrast, it is propagating similar ideas regarding class war and sexuality.

Firstly, by setting the action in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the film focusses on the peasant class which, at the time the film was made, the Communist regime was trying to bring over to its side. While seemingly the film goes against the current (by eschewing the socialist realist requirement to focus on pressing societal changes and contemporary issues), it gives Moscow-trained director Victor Iliu the opportunity to more subtly, but perhaps more effectively, build a discourse that can ultimately demonise "the old ways", and implicitly the predecessors of the *chiaburs*. This is a world that just sets itself up for perdition. Innkeeper Ghita falls under the spell of the money offered by the pig shepherd, thus sacrificing the peace of his home. Moral ambiguity characterises him, as well as cowardice and an inability to fight back, which are attributes condemned by the new social order. On a similar note, pig shepherd Lica and his men are depicted as greedy, amoral, violent, and lusty, characteristics that seem to wake a sense of desire in Ana, the innkeeper's wife.

The sexual undertones are evident in a scene which occurs briefly after Ana and Ghita's acquaintance to the pig shepherd. Slightly tipsy and in a good mood, Lica gets some musicians to play some upbeat traditional dance music, as he sweeps Ana off her feet and gets her to dance with him. The initially reluctant Ana quickly becomes engaged in the dance, which she evidently enjoys. The camera positioning (almost within the two

dancers' grasp) and its circular movement, as well as the actors' faces and their own movement within the frame (from left to right and back), work to illustrate the sexual attraction between Ana and Lica, while the fast and rhythmic editing shifts focus between the performers and the onlookers (Lica's men, Ana's husband and his mother, and it hints at the dangers to come. The men in Lica's entourage, typical figures of old-style chiaburs, as described by Liehm<sup>168</sup>, are fascinated with this spectacle, while Ghita and his mother look concerned, despite Ghita's suggestion that Ana should appease their guest by "letting herself danced" (the use of the verb in its transitive form also suggests the woman's perceived submissiveness). Lica's idea that Ghita brings a maid over, for his lads to have fun with, seals the significance of the dance, in retrospect, as a manifestation of lust and desire.

The inn's geographical location serves to enhance the characters' vulnerability. Framed in wide shots against the extensive Transylvanian plains (which, at times, seem to anticipate Miklos Jancso's visual style), the inn's isolation suggests that, in the absence of a community to both guide and protect them, the characters lose their moral compass and become prey to the chiaburs driven by bullying instincts, financial accumulation, and sexual voracity. It is also worth noting that, in state socialism, and even in Iliu's previous *In Our Village*, women's roles multiply, leading to the *triple burden* of performing professional, political, and domestic tasks (as per Fatu-Tutoveanu and Marginean), their individuality "almost annulled in favour of a non-sexual uniform image"<sup>169</sup>. In the world depicted by Iliu, Ana, who has just one role to play – that of the

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<sup>168</sup> Liehm, Mira and Antonin J. Liehm. *The Most Important Art. Soviet and Eastern European Film after 1945*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1977.

<sup>169</sup> Fatu-Tutoveanu, Andrada and Mara Marginean. "Constructing Females Identity: Women's Emancipation, Press and Propaganda". *Oceanide*, vol. 3, no. 11 (2011).

wife, is thus made more likely to become corrupted and, as a result, to trigger a tragedy.

The loss of the characters' moral compass culminates when Ghita, while secretly arranging to turn Lica in to the police, agrees to have Ana spend the night with the pig shepherd. In a second dance scene, which mirrors the first, the sexual tension changes. The music has the same level of energy here, but it gains slightly darker, threatening undertones, foreshadowing Ghita's predicament as mere bystander to his wife's infidelity, which he has incited himself. Ana is torn between her attraction to Lica and her social standing as a devoted wife and mother. Ghita, now the only "active" member of the audience for Ana and Lica's dance performance, paradoxically becomes more passive than before, when he first heard Lica's indecent proposal. The breaking of boundaries of accepted sexual norms is thus used to illustrate the rottenness and moral corruption of the chiabur class.

All these acts eventually result in the tragic demise of this world, which they bring upon themselves: the innkeeper kills his wife, only to be killed by Lica, who also dies trying to escape the police, by running into the burning mill. This punishment of not only the class enemy (the chiabur), but also of those who submit to him, is extremely effective from a political point of view, as far as the socialist state is concerned. It illustrates Marcuse's suggestion that love relationship with a "class enemy" is morally and politically wrong, as "it engages the entire existence of the individual and not only the private part of his existence, and thus it affects his relationship to others, to work, and to the state"<sup>170</sup>. The film suggests that the isolation from the community, moral

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<sup>170</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *Soviet Marxism*. London: Forgotten Books, 2018 [1958], 220.

indecisiveness, and also perhaps woman's single burden, pave the road to social perdition, in contrast to the bright society that the new type of Soviet-modelled men and women set out to construct. Therefore, while appearing non-related to films carrying the flag of the “cultural Stalinism” of the 1950s, *The Mill of Good Luck* falsifies the dialectic and, in fact, subtly reinforces dominant ideas regarding the opportunity and urgency of class war, using sexuality to demonise class enemies and, by law of reflection, sexuality itself.

#### **IV.6. *On My Responsibility*: Sexual “Anaesthetics”?**

In his book *Deaf Film in Dumb Romania*, Romanian critic Cristian Tudor Popescu calls *Pe raspunderea mea / On My Responsibility*, made at the end of the cultural semi-thaw sub-period of the 1950s, an “anaesthesia film”<sup>171</sup>. According to Popescu, films such as this brought something new in the whole propaganda discourse, which was the creation of a “fairy-like world, parallel to real Romania”. This may or may not be the case, as I will examine in what follows.

*On My Responsibility* tells the romantic story of Dinu (Iurie Darie) and Ioana (Ileana Iordache). Dinu is a fashion designer for a state-owned company, while Ioana is a tailoress in a textile factory that collaborates with Dinu's company. The two first meet outside work when they have to keep each other company in a photo lab they both run into to shelter themselves from a storm. They continue seeing each other, but agree to leave any talk on their profession out of their romantic encounters. As things go, their professional lives come in to complicate things though. Dinu's allegedly hideous design

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<sup>171</sup> Popescu, *Filmul surd...*, 167.

for a dress meets the refusal of the textile factory workers (Ioana's in particular), to actually manufacture the dress. Without knowing what the other one is doing for a living, they become professional antagonists, in a strikingly screwball fashion. Their relationship ends when the truth comes out, but they are appropriately reunited in the very last few minutes of the film, when Ioana steps in to replace a model wearing Dinu's dress design in a fashion show, thereby saving his professional reputation.

It is perhaps not surprising that this romantic comedy has screwball elements to it, given the enduring popularity of the genre since the 1930s, as well as the sublimation of sexual desire into dialogue and plot twists, which is so characteristic of screwball, as it adheres to the restrictions of the Hays Code (still in force until the early 1960s). It may seem surprising in the context of the Soviet-influenced style of filmmaking though, but we can speculate that the short period of relative liberalisation after Stalin's death allows for some minimal Western influences as well. Besides, propaganda remains a major component of this film, however subtle.

A tendency to put obstacles in the way of Dinu and Ioana's romance is apparent from the beginning of the film, and this can be associated to the screwball influences, as well as the new moral standards of social realist cinema. After agreeing to have their picture taken together in the photo lab, a very brief and surprising moment shows Ioana, shot in close-up, gazing at Dinu tidying up his hair and clothes in the mirror. The female gaze, full of romantic desire, is quickly interrupted by the photographer, preoccupied with getting the two ready to pose in a mock-up car. The photographer specifically interferes with the future lovers' attraction toward each other, by controlling their postures, which

results in a pose emblematic for the social realist ideal: two young people sitting next to each other, not touching each other and not looking at each other, but rather confidently and hopefully looking ahead toward a luminous future. This interference of authority in the private romantic lives of the individual is also suggested a few minutes later. The rain having stopped and the sun shining, Ioana runs for her friends at the bus. Dinu runs after her, but the traffic light turns red and he misses her. A policeman approaches him and, didactically, admonishes Dinu: “If you want to see each other again, don't cross the street when it's red. (...) Pay attention to the Stop sign”. This imagery (policeman, the hint at the colour red, the Stop sign) send a clear message of social rules prevailing over romantic accomplishment.

It is interesting to note the increasingly dominant social role that women are meant to play in this film, which once again is linked to a tendency toward gender equality in the early Communist society and is also reflected in *In Our Village*, as discussed above. Dinu's profession is that of a fashion designer, which tends to be (unjustly, but commonly) associated with femininity. By contrast, Ioana is a manual labourer, i.e. the type of character that the socialist authorities repeatedly advise should be depicted positively in films. This kind of gender role reversal (again, more or less subtly hinted at in most screwball comedies) is even more apparent with two other characters, Tincuta (Liliana Tomescu) and Serban (Marcel Anghelescu). Their own romance is also complicated by their professional lives: Tincuta is an engineer, while Serban is a pastry chef, who poses as a watchmaker, on account of that being a “more manly” occupation. Asked to help out with the fashion show by acting as a model for one of the dresses, Tincuta later confesses she found modelling “more difficult than a project for an

engine”, another illustration of how the new ideology advertises the effacement of differences between gender, with an idealised status being given to perceivedly masculine occupations.

There is also an ideological reading of the way in which the professional and the romantic intertwine in this film. As Popescu explains, “the *artists*, the *original* ones, the *creatives* are worthless without the intervention of [factory] workers to bring them back to reality. This light comedy insidiously promotes a strong Communist political principle: it's better to make mistakes together with the masses, the collective, the Party, than be right by yourself”. Dinu's professional and romantic fulfilment is only made possible by his involvement with a factory worker, a model of honesty, no-nonsense and hard work. There are three attempted kisses between the two romantic leads during the film, but the first two fail (they kiss on the cheek the first time, kiss on the cheek and rub their noses the second). It is only when the factory worker has her way (professionally) and, implicitly, brings the creative fashion designer closer to the dress model that “real” (Communist?) women actually want that they are allowed to briefly kiss on the mouth before the end credits start rolling in. However anaesthetic the film may be from a propagandistic point of view, sexual expression and sexual fulfilment are equally and perhaps more subversively anaesthetised as well.

#### **IV.7. Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at the ways in which the cinematic discourse of the 1950s reflected the Stalinist ideology, manifested in the arts and culture as socialist realism and the preoccupation for the birth of a new state order, as well as the creation of a



“new man”. The creation of the ideal socialist citizen was not possible without a virulent criticism against the old ways.

Based on this, I argue that films such as *The Mill of Good Luck*, while aesthetically accomplished and superior to pre-war films, were instrumental in repurposing sexuality, and in making it a weapon in the class struggle. Sexuality was represented as decadent, and as a symbol of the moral turpitude of rich rural dwellers, placed in direct opposition to the younger generation of peasants, depicted as confident in the future, focussed on community rather than love and romance, and willing to contribute to the otherwise traumatic process of collectivisation (as seen in the openly propagandistic *In Our Village*). On the other hand, the socialist morality and its guidelines in terms of what was and was not acceptable in romantic relationships moved toward a masculinisation of women, as suggested by both *In Our Village* and the urban comedy *On My Responsibility*. Not only sexuality, but gender was repurposed as well, in order to serve the new ideological framework.

## **Chapter V: Some Mice that Roar. Hints of Liberalisation in the 1960s**

When talking about Polish and Czechoslovak cinema, Ewa Mazierska argues that the 1960s represent “the true 'decade of love'”, in which feelings (and their representation on screen) become “fashionable”<sup>172</sup>. This fits in with a broader trend in world cinema, marked by “new waves” that bring a more open and a somewhat more complex perspective on issues concerning the individual and society, of which romance and sexuality are part of. This may also be true in the case of Romanian cinema, but to a lesser degree and with several differentiating nuances. In this chapter I will analyse the ways in which the transition from pure political propaganda to a more refined filmic approach manifested itself in terms of on-screen sexuality in Romanian cinema, looking in more detail at some of the films that handle this in a way that is fresh, (semi)liberated, but eventually suppressed. The tension between on-screen eroticism made visible, and the political demands of state censorship also come into focus here, as I look at the reception of European and global film stars in the Romanian context, with their sex-appeal as a key component of this analysis.

### **V.1. Political Relaxation, Economic Sunshine and Social Darkness**

Indeed, the 1960s are now regarded as a period of “liberalisation”, or rather “relaxation”, in Romania, not particularly in terms of cinema, but more generally, in most aspects of life and culture. While the first half of the decade saw a continuation of

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<sup>172</sup> Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema*, 150.

the class struggle as a theme for films produced in Romania, this happened at a less intense and less impactful level than in the 1950s. This trend was in line with an ideological relaxation caused by a continuous process of “de-Russification” or “de-Sovietization”. Within this process, Romanian-Russian institutions created after 1948 were reorganised; streets and cinemas that had their name changed (or “Russified”) in the 1950s went back to their initial names; Western books were translated more and more often; and Russian films tended to leave more room for Western productions, as far as imports are concerned. In 1964, Communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej officially declared Romania as being independent from the USSR, and asked that all KGB counsellors be recalled by Moscow, which finally happened in November of the same year.

If, from a political point of view, the distancing “liberation” from the Soviet Union was clearly visible and firmly stated, an important development in the late 1960s saw the state gaining immense powers in the internal social sphere. The now infamous Decree 770 of 1966 explicitly prohibited abortions and proclaimed that having multiple children was the desirable predicament for a typical Romanian family. The cinematic representation of this social situation would not become apparent until the 1970s, but it is worth delineating the main implications of the decree here, as they would impact the Romanian society and, to some extent, Romanian cinema, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, up to the very end of the Communist rule, and they would cast a shadow on the cinema of the most recent years as well (Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* being just the most famous and obvious example).

The Decree came into force only one year after the coming into power of Nicolae Ceaușescu, whose strategy was to differentiate himself and his policies from those of his predecessor, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. It was during Dej's rule, in 1957, that abortions were actually decriminalised and, blaming that measure for the decrease in birth rate in the first half of the 1960s, demographers loyal to the new regime advanced a proposal that would become Decree 770<sup>173</sup>. The preamble to the decree stated that interrupting a pregnancy was not only detrimental to women's health, but also to “fertility and the natural growth of the population”, which was to become part of Ceaușescu's wider concerns with Romania's demography.

The political regulation of reproduction is certainly not a phenomenon limited to Romania (or indeed to Eastern Europe), and as a general practice it's actually “hardly surprising”, in Kligman's words<sup>174</sup>, as it merely means that “individuals and collectivities ensure their continuity”, from a biological, social, but also economical point of view. This may, however, clash with individual rights, and particularly the right to privacy and the right to ownership over one's own body. This invasion into the individual's right to dispose of their sexuality whichever way they want is, in itself, not outside the categories of sexuality, as one Romanian woman quoted by Kligman suggests: “When the state usurps the private [one's privacy], the body is undressed in public”<sup>175</sup>. This “undressing in public” transforms the undressed (i.e. the woman's body) in objects of desire, not just for the undresser (the state), but also for the keen spectators watching from the outside. The intricacies of this mechanism are not entirely

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<sup>173</sup> Kligman provides a very good and more detailed context regarding this in her book.

<sup>174</sup> Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity*, 5.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

paradoxical: this symbolic display of the naked body works in conjunction with the prohibition to touch the actual body unless for reproduction, thus intensifying desire to the extent that it overpowers the acknowledgment of the risks implied by acting upon it. The desire is then act upon, thus ensuring reproduction and the effectiveness of the policy, at least in the state's eyes.

In practice though, this did not have the desired result. As abortions became illegal, they did not actually cease to exist. In Kligman's words, the decree simply “renders the practice invisible in the public sphere”<sup>176</sup>. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the socialist institutions actually realised the inefficacy of the decree, although they were certainly aware of, and legally punished, all women who continued to have abortions, as well as those who performed them. The more important point, however, is the recurring theme of forcing undesirable and, in the state's terms, reprehensible behaviours away from the public eye, of which cinema was clearly a part of. With one notable exception in the 1970s, which will be discussed in the next chapter, the problem of abortion and its collateral implications regarding the private sphere and sexuality, would not find a place on Romanian screens.

## **V.2. Various Degrees of Popularity. The Appeal of Foreign Stars**

Similarly to other countries in Eastern Europe, Romania saw an increase in living standards in the second half of the 1960s. More and more households could afford to buy cars, refrigerators, washing machines, as well as television sets, most of which tended to be produced either in Romania, or in the neighbouring countries of the Eastern

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176 *Idem*, p. 6.

bloc. In addition to Romanian productions, the national television channel started to broadcast television series from the West, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, a process that would continue successfully in the 1970s. Some of the more popular shows included *The Avengers* (Sydney Newman, UK, 1961), *The Saint* (Leslie Charteris, UK, 1962), *Bewitched* (Sol Saks, USA, 1964), *Daktari* (Art Arthur, Ivan Tors, USA, 1966), *The Forsyte Saga* (UK, 1967) etc. Most of these tended to be in the action-adventure genre (the now lesser known *Daktari* was actually a children's series focused on the adventures of an American veterinarian in East Africa), and some of them had a special appeal to Romanian audiences. For example, a decade before he would become known worldwide for playing James Bond, Roger Moore was already a heartthrob as far as Romanian female TV viewers were concerned, and the legend of his sex appeal as the titular character in *The Saint* would long be remembered, way into the 1980s.

Cinema as cultural practice was also becoming increasingly popular in the 1960s. In 1963, Romanian cinemas were welcoming an estimated half a million spectators a day<sup>177</sup>. Not only cities benefited from access to cinemas. In the decade and a half since Romania had become a socialist country, around 3,800 cinemas have been built in villages around the country<sup>178</sup>. The article quoting these figures also praises the selection of foreign films shown, both from the West and from the Eastern bloc<sup>179</sup>, and it is obvious that romance has a pride of place in many of them: *Peace to Him Who Enters / Mir vkhodyashchemu* (Aleksandr Alov, Vladimir Naumov, USSR, 1961), a

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<sup>177</sup> "200.000.000!". *Cinema*, no. 3 (1963): 8.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

World War II drama about three soldiers rescuing a pregnant German woman; *Clear Skies / Chistoe nebo* (Grigoriy Chukhray, USSR, 1961), another love story set during WWII; Palme d'Or winning melodrama *The Long Absence / Une aussi longue absence* (Henri Colpi, France, 1961); *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, USA, 1960); marriage drama set in the world of nuclear physics *Nine Days in One Year / 9 dney odnogo goda* (Mikhail Romm, USSR, 1962); *But What If This Is Love? / A Esli Eto Lyubov?* (Yuli Raizman, USSR, 1962), a teenage love story tragically destroyed by the interference of outsiders; Bulgarian apocalyptic love story *Sun and Shadow / Slantzeto i syankata* (Rangel Vulchanov, Bulgaria, 1962). Post-neorealist Italian films in which sex and sexuality were visible to varying degrees were also available to Romanian filmgoers in 1963, for example *Rocco and His Brothers / Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Luchino Visconti, Italy, 1960), *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy, 1960), or *Divorce Italian Style / Divorzio all'italiana* (Pietro Germi, Italy, 1961).

Some of the very successful commercial films shown in Romania at the time included the Italian costume dramas *The Mongols / I mongoli* (Andre de Toth, Leopoldo Savona, 1961), with a couple of semi-nude scenes featuring Anita Ekberg and Antonella Lualdi, and peplum *Carthage in Flames / Cartagina in fiamme* (Carmine Gallone, 1960). While semi-nudity was very common to such sword-and-sandal films, this did not seem to please all spectators: a factory worker interviewed by the national film magazine *Cinema* complained both about the costumes, which were “often an offense to good taste”<sup>180</sup>, and about the films itself, which, the same spectator seems to think, were a depiction of history that actually “vulgarises” history. *The Young Ones* (Sidney J. Furie,

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<sup>180</sup> *Cinema*, no. 6 (1963), 26.

UK, 1961), playing on Cliff Richard's appeal as the British version of Elvis Presley, and on the potential of rock'n'roll to liberate the youth from the repressive constraints of their conservative parents, was again very popular at the Romanian box-office. Once more though, *Cinema* managed to find a "regular" spectator dissatisfied with the film, for inaccurately representing what the youth were actually like<sup>181</sup>. During the Cold War, this tactic of giving voice to "concerned" members of the public, to speak against Western culture and its inappropriateness to socialist audiences, was widely put into practice across the Eastern bloc. From the point of view of cinema, it had an important role in reinforcing the dominant ideology, and in delegitimising the presence of such films on Romanian screens (and, by extension, the potential visibility of sexuality). The fact that this is contradicted by the actual audience figures themselves is a symptom of the "doublethink" characteristic of totalitarianism.

Roger Vadim's cinematic meditations on desire, attraction and eroticism were also quickly dismissed, this time by the critics rather than the general public. In an article on the French New Wave, S. Damian blames the indulgence with which Vadim dwells on issues of sex and sexuality for commercial purposes:

Announced as a reaction to the conventional, many films end up by flattening their rather innovative formula, creating one convention to replace another. This leads to a new establishment of clichés. Cultivating sexuality and the high-life became a revenue source for Roger Vadim, a director whose career was launched with a bang. (...) The preferred setting of some films by Vadim, Philippe de

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.



Broca<sup>182</sup>, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze<sup>183</sup> are the ultra-modern bedsits, in which one can hear the syncopated sound of the recorder, the dance steps of the sketchily dressed actress, the gurgling of cognac. The surfeiting of a youth electrified only by fast driving on the highway and by sexual perversions is painted with a benevolent complicity.<sup>184</sup>

With this last line, Damian suggests that the newly discovered sexual drive of the youth should be cinematically handled with anything but benevolence and/or complicity, and dismisses it all as “frivolous”. The targeted films remained unnamed, but they were likely to include the Brigitte Bardot vehicles ...*And God Created Woman / Et Dieu... crea la femme* (France, 1956) and *Please, Not Now! / La bride sur le cou* (France, 1961), as well as the lavish and alluring *Blood and Roses / Et mourir de plaisir* (France, 1961), or the Marquis de Sade adaptation *Vice and Virtue / Le vice et la vertu* (France, 1963). In a different issue of *Cinema* of the same year, Vadim's more recent creations, including *Nutty, Naughty Chateau / Chateau en Suede* (France, 1963), were deemed to have “a conformism in vulgarity that tires even [Vadim's] old admirers”, after his earlier “eroticising (sic!) films, that some considered non-conformist”<sup>185</sup>.

On the other hand, *Cinema* seemed to take a liking to people in world cinema that tended to move away from such vulgarity toward more “serious” terrains. One such

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<sup>182</sup> Known for *The Joker / Le farceur* (France, 1960), in which Jean-Pierre Cassel plays a happy-go-lucky flirt who tempts Anouk Aimee out of an arid marriage, but also as one of the directors of the omnibus *The Seven Deadly Sins / Les sept peches capitaux* (France, 1962), in which some sexual themes are present. Other co-directors include Vadim himself, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Demy, Jean-Luc Godard, but also Romanian-born playwright Eugene Ionesco.

<sup>183</sup> Known for *The French Game / Le coeur battant* (France, 1961), the story of a lusty love affair starring Francoise Brion and a very young and dreamy Jean-Louis Trintignant.

<sup>184</sup> Damian, S. “Incontro se indreapta noul val?”. *Cinema*, no. 2 (1964), 8.

<sup>185</sup> *Cinema*, no. 3 (1964), 30.

example was Gina Lollobrigida. In 1965, *Cinema* applauded her for her “new personality”<sup>186</sup>, in an ample article. The author, writing in correspondence from Rome, praises her “healthy common sense”, and seems struck by how Lollobrigida had become an avid reader of literary fiction, ranging from Stendhal to Moravia, as well as poetry, all of this in stark contrast to the more sensuous persona for which she used to be known. While the *Playboy* magazine was by no means known (not to mention available) to Romanian audiences under normal circumstances, revealing its existence was acceptable when it was done for ideological purposes (i.e. to illustrate the moral degradation of the West), all the more effective when a Western star could be used as a vehicle for this type of propaganda:

Anyway, one thing's for sure, she says: she's done with the Gina whose hair is done in the manner of the bersagliera in *Pane, amore e fantasia*, or with the other one, half-naked and full of jewellery, like the queen of Sheba. Vehemently, Gina states that she doesn't want to get in the habit that so many of her Italian and foreign colleagues did, that of showing themselves naked in photographs and films. She's indignant at Carroll Baker and Kim Novak, whose attractive curves illustrate the pages of *Playboy*, the sophisticated American magazine of eroticism. She's indignant at Claudia Cardinale laying on a piece of fluffy red fur (even though she's not 6 months old anymore), and Sophia Loren half-naked in a brothel in *Matrimonio all'italiana*. She's revolted by Virna Lisi, who told a French journalist: ‘I want to seal this epoch with my body’.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Rosetti, Enrico. “O noua personalitate a Ginei Lollobrigida?”. *Cinema*, no. 8 (1965), 11.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

While Lollobrigida, Brigitte Bardot and even Sophia Loren were a constant presence in the pages of the state-controlled film magazine (more discretely in the first half of the decade, more intensely toward the end), one of the most popular and appealing foreign female stars, at least in what audiences were concerned, did not seem to get much critical support and validation. In the late 1950s – early 1960s, Spanish singer and actress Sara Montiel made a cycle of films with Luis Cesar Amadori, which were in high demand in Romanian cinemas: *The Violet Seller / La violetera* (Spain, 1958), *My Last Tango / Mi ultimo tango* (Spain, 1960), *Sin of Love / Pecado de amor* (Spain, 1962). The romantic storylines, coupled with Montiel's own sex-appeal, can explain why her films were even more popular with Romanian audiences than Bardot's and Loren's, albeit just slightly. Audiences just seemed to love the actress, whom they nicknamed “Sarita”, and they did not hesitate to take a stance against the critical disregard that *Cinema* was showing toward her. In a letter addressed to the magazine by a group of readers from the Transylvanian town of Mediaş, they offer their own statistics to support their dissatisfaction: “Our favourite artist is Sara Montiel... But in 26 issues she was only present twice! In the same magazine, Sophia Loren or Brigitte Bardot were present about 3-4 times each!”<sup>188</sup>. *Cinema's* response is fairly brief and dismissive: Montiel's fame and her “value” as an actress do not equal the degree to which the readers fancy her. Of equal popularity was Montiel's co-star in *My Last Tango*, Maurice Ronet, as well as other French heartthrobs such as Alain Delon or Gerard Barray, whose adventure films *Captain Fracasse / Le Capitaine Fracasse* (France, 1961) and *Scheherezade / Sheherezade* (France, 1963), both directed by Pierre Gaspard-Huit, were also box office hits in Romania. Readers of *Cinema* would often

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<sup>188</sup> *Cinema*, no. 6 (1965), 32.

write in to ask about these male stars' marital status, which is in itself an indication of the power of desire to transform audiences from passive viewers into active followers and prospective (though highly unlikely) romantic interests for those stars. While the magazine editors somewhat annoyingly pointed out that they were not the Registry Office to be able to answer these queries, they seemed to have their own standards of sex-appeal, singling out Jean-Paul Belmondo as a “standard of modern masculine beauty”<sup>189</sup>.

### **V.3. “Good” Critics Go to *Cinema*, *Cinema* Goes Against the “Bad”**

#### **West**

The institutionalisation of censorship did not become definitive until the 1970s, with the creation of the Council for the Socialist Culture and Education (CSCE). Before then, decisions regarding the “suitability” of films (for production, as well as for exhibition) were made either within Romaniafilm (the national film production organisation), in official party meetings (such as those of the Ideological Committee of the Romanian Communist Party), or, as of 1968, by a commission created within the Film Distribution Service of the Direction of the Cinematographic Network and Film Distribution, designed to watch and to approve film imports (I shall discuss this a bit further on).

In this context, film criticism had a very important role in the public approval or rejection of films, particularly imports. The opinions voiced by the critics could make or break the chances of a film being shown on the Romanian screens. The only film criticism outlet under Romanian state socialism was the monthly *Cinema* magazine,

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<sup>189</sup> *Cinema*, no. 7 (1965), 2.

which would become extremely popular, from its very first issue in 1963, despite being edited by the State Committee for Culture and Art. However competent its contributors, it cannot be denied that *Cinema* maintained a complicit relationship with the Communist rule throughout its existence: for the film critics to keep their jobs there, compromise and adherence to the dominant ideology were unwritten parts of their job description. While itself rather liberal in the 1960s (it would only become blatantly propagandistic in the 1970s), *Cinema* was a key contributor to the pro-socialist, and anti-imperialist public discourse of the Cold War, and issues pertaining to sexuality had a part to play in this.

For example, as far as the Romanian critics were concerned, the popularity of *L'avventura* was based on Antonioni's critique of sexuality, specifically in the West versus East context. This then becomes a reason to commend and to recommend the film to Romanian audiences. Take, for example, Silvian Iosifescu's extended review of the film, in which he writes:

These people that go from a cruise to parties in a luxurious hotel are incapable of communicating to each other, just as they're not up to feeling affect, but only sensations. Love is reduced to sexuality. It is consumed like a drug that aims to neutralise their anxieties and their sense of void for a few brief moments. With his amazing sensitivity to the significant gesture, Antonioni guides his actors in this manner during the love scenes. The frenzy of these scenes is rather a frenzy of restlessness than one of passion, and tenderness is absent.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Iosifescu, Silvian. "Aventura". *Cinema*, no. 7 (1963), 19.

While this is an accurate and perfectly valid reading of *L'avventura*, Iosifescu's intellectual excitement mirrors rather than questions Antonioni's view of sexuality, which becomes de-idealised in the absence of “tenderness”. Iosifescu's final remark that Antonioni's films are “important [...] for a terrible diagnosis given to a society”<sup>191</sup> links the sexual with the ideological: by *a* society one should understand, of course, the Western one, and the diagnosis is “terrible” because Western capitalism is in terminal decline as far as the Eastern bloc is concerned during the Cold War.

In the same context, it is interesting to see how communist director Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose later films became transgressive not least because of their treatment of sexuality, was pitied for having been “condemned by the bourgeois justice”<sup>192</sup> because of *Accattone* (Italy, 1961) and *Mamma Roma* (Italy, 1962). *Cinema* stayed silent regarding the thematic universe of the two films, the grim world of pimps and prostitutes, which they dismissed as being “a dramatic tableau of Italy today”<sup>193</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that most of the films listed above come under the general category of arthouse cinema, or were at least festival favourites. The *Cinema* magazine seems to praise them precisely based on this, stating that regularly watching such films would help viewers free themselves from the “inertia” of bad taste, allegedly cultivated by popular films (remember *Cinema*'s opinions of popular films, discussed earlier).

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> *Cinema*, no. 3 (1963), 22.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

It is also interesting to see what standards of screen representations of intimacy the critics promoted, since they were the ones that were able to shape both the reception of the films and, to some extent, the types of films shown on Romanian screens. Thus, erotic scenes in Romanian films were often praised for their purity. Ioan Grigorescu points this out when he reviews *The Age of Love / Vîrsta dragostei* (Francisc Munteanu, 1963)<sup>194</sup>. The critic considers naturalness to be “the most distinct note of the film”. In terms of perceiving the erotic relationship and its representation, “naturalness” is reduced to “the wait, the restlessness of unrequited love, (...), walking the streets and the parks in silence – and there's a lot of ‘walking’ in the film”<sup>195</sup>. Not only is the absence of sexual intimacy invested with purity, but it is also forced, by the critic, into a realm of naturalness – or normativity.

Another reviewer, Ana Roman, takes a similar critical stance when talking about Abram Room's *The Garnet Bracelet / Granatovyy braslet* (USSR, 1965). In the introduction to her review, Roman complains about “sublime, stable and uninterested love” not being fashionable anymore: “we've rather got used to hastily labelling as melodrama anything that refers to clean feelings, and to suspect of moralising intentions any attempt to plead for a superior ethic of love”<sup>196</sup>. In socialist Romania, this idea of “clean feelings” became one of the most widely spread tropes to denote platonic love, or love sanitised from all “impure” (i.e. sexual) elements. Love devoid of sexuality was thus made not just normative, but superior to other types of love.

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<sup>194</sup> Grigorescu, Ioan. “Fericirea nu-i rusine”. *Cinema*, no. 9 (1963): 17.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Roman, Ana. “Largo appassionato”. *Cinema*, no. 7 (1965): 12.

Heteronormativity, upon which there were several critical and ideological limitations thrust, had overwhelming prevalence in 1960s Romania. In this context, it is to be expected that films such as *Victim* (Basil Dearden, UK, 1961), which has since become a key entry in the canon of queer cinema, would not even be talked about, not to mention distributed in Romanian cinemas (people engaging in homosexual acts in public used to be sent to prison, and in 1968 the Penal Code was harshly rewritten to punish all homosexual acts). It can therefore come as a surprise to discover a note on *Victim* in the pages of *Cinema*. This was published three years after the film's release in Western markets, and had an obvious derogatory tone: “Less with conflicts that explode in violent scenes with spectacular fights and modern swordsmen, and more often with sombre psycho-pathologic dramas. Dirk Bogarde has the role of a magistrate that risks his career and his home to unmask the members of a well-organised gang of homosexuals, guilty of the death of a young man”<sup>197</sup>. The overly simplified plot summary is mischievously misleading, and it reflects the hesitation of both the anonymous author, and of the society as a whole, to speak about homosexuality in terms other than condemnation.

In a similar, but much “airier” context, the subversion of heteronormativity and gender roles in *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, USA, 1959), completely evaded the Romanian reviewer Al. Crețulescu, who focuses mostly on Sugar Cane's “alcoholism” and “failed existence, torn apart by loneliness”<sup>198</sup> even in her romantic happy-end. For Crețulescu, Marilyn Monroe's character is alone, sad, desperate, bitter and weary, a “singer with no

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<sup>197</sup> *Cinema*, no. 10 (1964), 10.

<sup>198</sup> Crețulescu, Al. “Burlescul ‘la cald’”. *Cinema*, no. 8 (1965), 20-21.



vocation and a woman with too much of it”<sup>199</sup>. The reviewer denies the character's erotic accomplishment even when admitting it: “happy-end, but strictly from a sentimental point of view”. This is an illustration of the “doublethink” characteristic of the official critical and ideological discourse of the times: erotic fulfilment is a happy-end, but because it’s erotic, it’s not the happiest of ends. It is also worth noting the elimination of any suggestive or ambiguous terms in the translation of the film's title. While “hot” does refer to how the girls like to play their music, it also alludes to something more sexual. This is completely absent from the Romanian title, which translates as *Some Like Jazz*.

More provocative titles were not even considered for distribution on Romanian screens. This was facilitated by derogatory reviews coming in from festivals. *Loving Couples / Alskande par* (Mai Zetterling, Sweden, 1964), a drama centred on three women looking back on their sex lives, was seen by an anonymous reviewer as “cruel up to savagery, manly up to brutality”: “Disregarding all conventions, seemingly ignoring that feeling that dictionaries call bashfulness, Mai Zetterling reveals immorality with such frenzy that at some point the film tends to become some sort of anthology of vice. It won't be a loss if [National Film] Distribution doesn't acquire this film”<sup>200</sup>.

Officially, several important films of the 1960s were deemed non-distributable and banned from Romanian screens, as they contravened “our ethical-philosophical ideals”<sup>201</sup>. One can safely assume that the sexual morality they depicted was likely a

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> *Cinema*, no. 10 (1965), 28.

<sup>201</sup> *Probleme actuale ale filmului artistic si ale difuzarii filmului de lungmetraj*. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Romania, 88/1968.

reason for their rejection. *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, Italy, 1960), *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, UK, 1962), and, later on, *Belle de Jour* (Luis Bunuel, France, 1967) are just some of the most well-known examples. Similarly, while not completely banned, the highly successful films of Sara Montiel, as well as the European coproduction series starring Michele Mercier as sexy 17<sup>th</sup> century heroine Angelique<sup>202</sup> (films which remained popular for decades to come), were deemed as mere “syrupy stories”, “mediocrities in colour” that would just “lead to degrading the taste for beauty”<sup>203</sup>.

One of the most critically acclaimed Romanian films of the 1960s was *The Stranger / Străinul* (Mihai Iacob, 1964). While maintaining some of the issues related to class difference and its effect on romantic relationships, it opened up the debate to previously invisible erotic undercurrents, something which Cristian Tudor Popescu calls “propaganda eroticism”<sup>204</sup>. Thus, the male lead Andrei (Ștefan Iordache) is no longer “pure and tough”, as young communist men used to be depicted in Romanian films of the '50s. He is allowed to not just admire a maid's bottom (on which the camera focusses for a few good seconds), but also to say about a beautiful schoolgirl (later revealed as Sonia, the female lead, played by Irina Petrescu) that he would indeed “have some fun” with her. During a brief erotic encounter, Andrei and Sonia are sitting by a river, half-undressed. After a close-up of them kissing on the mouth (something quite

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<sup>202</sup> *Angelique / Angelique, marquise des anges* (Bernard Borderie, France / West Germany / Italy, 1964), *Angelique, the Road to Versailles / Merveilleuse Angelique* (Bernard Borderie, France / Italy / West Germany, 1965), *Angelique and the King / Angelique et le roy* (Bernard Borderie, France / Italy / West Germany, 1966), *Untamable Angelique / Indomptable Angelique* (Bernard Borderie, France / Italy / West Germany, 1967), and *Angelique and the Sultan / Angelique et le sultan* (Bernard Borderie, France / Italy / West Germany, 1968).

<sup>203</sup> *Probleme actuale...*

<sup>204</sup> Popescu, *Filmul surd*, 147.

rarely seen in Romanian films up to that point), the camera pans down to hip-level, suggestive of the effect the kiss has on their genital areas. While Popescu says that this was “the most advanced erotic scene in Romanian film up to then”, he also argues that it was merely “meant to make propaganda more marketable”<sup>205</sup>.

#### **V.4. “Sexy” Seems to Be the Hardest Word**

Overall though, throughout the decade, national film production saw a significant reduction in blatantly propagandistic films, which were outnumbered by light, sometimes musical, comedies. Popescu argues that around 60% of the Romanian films made in the 1960s were entertainment, with 40% or even less propaganda films<sup>206</sup>. Even though this is not necessarily a productive distinction (as it suggests that entertainment films cannot be propagandistic), the figures did not satisfy the new leadership of the Communist party.

Gheorghiu-Dej having died in 1965, the party was now fronted by Nicolae Ceaușescu. On 23 May 1968, the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (CC of RCP) debated the main issues facing the film industry, one of which was precisely the distinction between ideologically correct films and commercial films. During this meeting, filmmaker Ion Popescu-Gopo complained that selling Romanian films abroad, including to countries from the Eastern bloc, was becoming more and more difficult. Even more serious was the fact that Romanian audiences for Romanian films were in decline, according to Popescu-Gopo. He blamed

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 116.

critics for their alleged lack of interest in the national cinema, arguing that “they're not content with our own production and they praise to adoration some foreign films, they popularise stars that are still unknown over here, and they don't shy away from comparing a brutal sex film with a film about the work of our peasants in cooperatives”<sup>207</sup>. He finished his intervention by asking (a question that will remain unanswered, at least formally) whether it would be necessary for the industry to “adapt” to commercial demands, and, if so, whether filmmakers were supposed to make ideological concessions. The economic aspect and its growing importance were further discussed by director Sergiu Nicolaescu, who made some comparisons between Romanian cinema and other cinemas in the East, such as the Polish and the Czechoslovak ones, who were not only critically, but also economically successful worldwide. Crucially, Nicolaescu identified sexuality as the primary factor for the success and commercial viability of these films:

The Czechoslovak cinema [...] nowadays presents films that, as the press worldwide states, the exact term for these films, and I'm sorry to utter it here, is ‘sexy’, meaning films in which sexuality is presented in a very open way. It's true that the Czech use this, and with this method they've managed to sell films and to have good press worldwide. I don't mean to say that they've made it by only doing such films, they've also done very good films, with ideological content, but their global success was of this manner.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Transcript 88/1968. Meeting of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, 23 May 1968.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

The subtle distinction between films in which “sexuality is presented in a very open way” and “very good films, with ideological content” might suggest an explanation as to why Romanian films and filmmakers have lacked a preoccupation for aspects related to sex and sexuality. They were seen as fundamentally outside ideology (or at least outside socialist ideology) and would therefore not have any social relevance, i.e. no social use to those in power. This distinction also impairs the artistic or aesthetic potential of sex-themed films, as well as the ability for audiences to want to engage with this potential, by putting “sexy” and “very good” in an irreconcilable opposition.

For Nicolaescu (and undoubtedly for most of those in power at the time), sexuality was to a wide extent purely physiological. In this view, just as physiology would not belong in the realm of “art” (remember the film critics’ remarks about vulgarity and vice), sexuality should not be “openly” present there either. Another sort of doublethink thus becomes apparent in Nicolaescu's further intervention, during which he suggested that he wanted to both use eroticism in his work-in-progress *Michael the Brave / Mihai Viteazul* (which was finished in 1971), and to also strip it of all its “shameful” elements. The obvious question here is what the “shameful elements” of eroticism are, and who decides what they are. Do they hark back to a vaguely defined, traditional morality? Or does this alleged shameful only reside in the process of making visible? But one needs to bear the context in mind: this was not a debate about ethics, but one about political economy. This illustrates Marcuse’s assertion that, “the more the moral values become political values and the more moral behaviour becomes right political behaviour, the less room there is for *independent* ethical principles”<sup>209</sup>. The visibility of

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<sup>209</sup> Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 231.

eroticism here is less a matter of public morality, and more one of political adherence.

While formally trying to lament the difficulties encountered in the process of his film being “green-lit”, Nicolaescu ultimately appealed to the political decision-makers for permission on how to treat sexuality artistically:

I'm not saying I really want, in my next film, for one of the heroes to go for a pee, there's no need to do this thing on stage or on film, but either way I need this man to love, to have some feelings. I'm telling you this because I'm stopped in my track by some difficulties. Can Michael the Brave love, or not?<sup>210</sup>

In response, party activist George Ivaşcu dismissed Nicolaescu's claim that sexuality is one of the factors for a film's success, saying that “it wasn't because they were sexy” that Polish and Czech films fare better internationally, but because “they had a personality”. Through this, the party attempts to divert the discourse from a clear and, ultimately, extremely practical issue for a filmmaker, into something very vague, and therefore more subject to interpretation: it is anyone’s guess what the “personality” of a cinema industry means, but it is precisely through such abstractions that some discourses, including the socialist one in this case, exert power (in Monique Wittig’s words, even if the discourse is abstract, it produces power that acts “materially over our bodies and minds”, and is therefore “its very expression”<sup>211</sup>). As a representative of the ruling party, Ivascu seemed oblivious to the economic argument that filmmakers brought forth, instead pleading for even more ideological control and, ultimately, for

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991, 26.

revitalising propaganda:

I'll even go as far as to say that, for foreigners, the film *Dacii*<sup>212</sup> did not seem like a film with Romanian traits, like a Romanian national production, but like an effort to make highly successful films – and besides, the title with which it runs in Paris [Les guerriers] explains almost everything. Whereas *Cruciații*<sup>213</sup> bears the imprint that it's Polish.<sup>214</sup>

Another party activist, Dan Hăulică, on the other hand, reinforced the idea that comparing national film production to Western cinema was unnecessary. For some reason, he also equated the cinematic treatment of sex with snobbishness. He also believed there was something more than “the cheap effect” of those foreign sexy films that Romanian cinema should learn about instead, and dismissed what he called the three (thematic) S's: sex, sadism, and sensuality.

Nicolae Ceaușescu had the final intervention in this meeting of 1968. On the surface, his point of view seems to be quite balanced, as he attempted to give equal weight to both economic responsibility and ideological content. However, hints of the hard censorship that was about to engulf Romanian culture in just three years' time already became apparent, and eroticism in cinema was not spared in Ceaușescu's intervention.

Firstly, he seemed to think it unacceptable for Western films to be more commercially

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<sup>212</sup> *The Dacians / Dacii* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, Romania / France, 1966).

<sup>213</sup> *Black Cross / Krzyzacy* (Aleksander Ford, Poland, 1960).

<sup>214</sup> Transcript 88/1968.

viable in Romania than Romanian films themselves. However, to him, commercial viability was not measured by the film's profits, but by its impact on “man's socialist consciousness”. Therefore, he indicated, only those films that could contribute to the expansion of Romanians' cultural horizons should be imported from there on: “We aim, comrades, to take what is good from the whole universal culture. We didn't aim and we never aim to take what is decadent, what is rotten, what is called to push man toward becoming a brute, toward decadence, to prevent man from thinking and find a solution to his own problems. Such art has no place in our country”<sup>215</sup>.

The party leader then went on to reprimand Romanian filmmakers for their inability to take inspiration from the important social and economic transformations that the country had been through since the end of the war, instead allegedly focussing on their acute sensibility to obscenity, nudity, and on imitating the ways in which these were handled cinematically in the West:

What are [the writers, directors etc.] so sensitive and receptive about? About the fact that you really must present a naked female artist – female comrades to pardon me – is that what they're receptive about? About the fact that you must present some obscene dances or decadent music? About the fact that one has to disgustingly imitate what's made in Western film and art?<sup>216</sup>

It is quite difficult to understand this tough reaction from Ceaușescu's, when Romanian cinema of the 1960s was, overall, so puritanical compared not just to Western films, but

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.



to other Eastern European cinemas. Even more, the Western films that were shown on Romanian screens were not particularly sexually explicit, and sex scenes, if present in the original film, were carefully cut by the censors before distribution. Perhaps Ceaușescu saw decadence and immorality not in the alleged nudity, or in the obscenity of certain dancing scenes, but in the exoticism of the popular genres (action adventure, Roman epics, musicals etc.), which could distract viewers from the process of building and developing their socialist conscience. In this way, informally, the Communist leadership not just regulated film sexuality, but also inadvertently eviscerated the reasons for certain film genres' appeal to audiences, thus paving the way for the historical epics of the 1970s, which were ideologically rich, but tended not to have as much popular appeal.

## **V.5. Me, Myself and Her: The Curious Case of *A Midsummer Day's Smile***

Director Geo Saizescu made his film debut in 1953 with an adaptation of Czech writer Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*. For most of his career, he would produce broad comedies, a genre which would bring him incredible success with Romanian audiences not just throughout the decades of state socialism, but even to this day. *A Midsummer Day's Smile / Un surîs în plină vară* (Romania, 1963) illustrates the transition between the heavily propagandised content of 1950s cinema and the more light-hearted approach characteristic of several films of the '60s and early '70s.

The film tells the story of Făniță (Sebastian Papaiani), a young man returning to his native small village, after years of “gaining experience” in the ways of the world, away

from home. The historical moment captured is the collectivisation of agriculture, a theme still quite popular at the beginning of the 1960s, though perhaps not handled as propagandistically as it was in the 1950s. While most of the village inhabitants are thoroughly and enthusiastically enjoying the benefits of the collectivisation, Făniță finds himself the outsider, due to his strong beliefs in the value of individual work, and his plans to succeed in private enterprise. When he confronts his family about his wish of being a trader rather than a worker in the Agricultural Production Cooperative, his parents firmly reply that it's impossible to “live after your [his] own head” (the literal translation of the Romanian expression “a trăi după capul tău”). By socialist standards, where women as labour force were officially proclaimed to be men's equals, Făniță's brief and misogynistic response – “I won't talk to women” – is meant to characterise him as backward, completely out of touch with the realities of contemporary rural Romania.

Before the character's determination and his intent of separating himself from the masses is even expressed, he is given the chance to meet his former flame, Liorica (Florina Luican). Saizescu clearly positions her as the object of desire for Făniță. Framed lying on the grass by the riverbank, in a medium shot, with the shadow of Făniță's hand on her breast, the girl becomes the romantic promise for the hero, a promise which may or may not be kept, depending on how the man behaves in society. Soon after, the two lovers initiate a game of “hide and speak”, where they stand by different telegraph poles well away from one another, and pretend they are telephoning each other. From the film's point of view, they are denied intimacy: they just pretend to communicate with each other. Filmed in a long shot to accentuate the gap between

them, this is clearly meant to articulate not just the romantic distance between the two characters, but also the distance between what each of them represents: the woman as the exponent of the new village order, and the man as merely a faint apparition in the background of the frame, and also in the background of history being made.

As Făniță's each and every attempt to succeed in business fails, the gap between him and Liorica becomes wider. This is not so much because Liorica grows tired of him, or gives up on him – on the contrary, the woman comes across as strong and patient, waiting for the “stray dog” to find his way: the way toward the new socialist order.

While inclined to ridicule Făniță for his failures, most of the village inhabitants initially mirror Liorica's patience. Their attitudes soon change though, as Făniță's determination (read by the others as “stubbornness” and persistence in error) becomes stronger. The film builds a strong connection between the romantic and the economic, and suggests that one is not actually possible without the other. Făniță's ambition to succeed on his own slowly alienates Liorica. On the other hand, his failed enterprises make him resentful and aggressive toward her, even though she is eventually the only one left having faith in Făniță's ability to “come around”. When the woman goes to visit him (a rather assertive act, but not particularly surprising in the context of the gender uniformity promoted by socialism), a frustrated Făniță attempts to make her seem out of place with tradition, reproaching her that a “big girl”<sup>217</sup> like her should not come to see a boy “in full sight” (in Romanian, the expression he uses, “în ochii lumii”, literally translates as “in the world's eyes”). This episode is once more meant to signify Făniță as the old-fashioned character, perhaps even dark and secretive: in the “new world”, a girl

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<sup>217</sup> In the Romanian context, “big girl” is usually used to designate a virgin.

asserting her interest and concern for her loved one is not something to be blamed anymore, whereas the man's reaction of *visibility panic* is associated with the obsolete rural ways. The question remains whether this can stand as a progressive statement, or whether it is actually meant to symbolize the absence of sexual intent in the girl approaching the boy, which of course, in itself, does not have anything "shameful" about it.

Where the film becomes ever so slightly subversive is in its resolution. As opposed to *In Our Village*, for example, where everyone joins together in celebration of the "proper" couple coming together, the denouement of *A Midsummer Day's Smile* is much more ambiguous and anguished than would initially appear, and suggests that romantic and sexual accomplishment is only possible in communism if one becomes submissive to the dominant ideology. The dramatic confusion that Liorica is to be engaged with another man acts as a "wake-up call" for Făniță. After losing almost everything (the possibility of succeeding in his endeavours, but also the respect of the community and that of his family), he realises that he might also lose the one other thing that is actually still within his reach. In the final scene, the two lovers dance in circles down the road, the camera slowly moving upwards and into a crane shot, with the promise of an auspicious sunset in the (ideological) left of the frame. However, the scene just prior to this renders the happy-end rather bittersweet. As he reflects on everything he has lost, a tracking shot follows Făniță wandering around the empty village, in the shadow of the telephone lines, looking lost and full of anguish. In the shadow of this scene, the final romantic reconnection with Liorica in fact reads as the compromise of a man beaten down by the expectations of a society he does not belong to. If he wants the girl, he

must also accept the new order that she represents. Erotic accomplishment, as seen in *A Midsummer Day's Smile*, comes with self-deceit, and with dancing and laughter, to obstruct the loss of the self within the social.

## **V.6. The Dissent of *A Film with a Charming Girl***

The “films with engineers” that have dominated Romanian film production in the late 1950s and well into the 1960s were given a subtle and short-lived blow by *A Film with a Charming Girl / Un film cu o fata fermecatoare* (Romania, 1966), written by journalist and short-story writer Radu Cosașu, and directed by Fine Arts graduate Lucian Bratu following his relatively successful historical epic *Tudor* (Romania, 1963). Obviously inspired by *Cleo from 5 to 7 / Cleo de 5 a 7* (Agnes Varda, France, 1962), the film follows Ruxandra (Margareta Pîslaru), a young aspiring actress who fails her university entry exams, while she goes on minor and not particularly exciting adventures in and around Bucharest, with a plethora of married and unmarried men, which she flirts and plays with for the sake of playing.

While at a first glance the film does not take a clearly political stance, the heroine's meanderings and aimlessness, as well as the film's episodic, non-linear narrative structure, led to it being “shelved” (a common practice across Eastern and Central Europe, as Dina Iordanova explains<sup>218</sup>). The film was criticised (including by the national press, after some initially favourable reviews) for allegedly discrediting the Romanian youth, ultimately seen as an “immoral” act. Shown only in a few select cinemas, the film gathered less than 622,000 spectators in a year and a half, a number

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<sup>218</sup> Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, 34.

which only managed to add 63,000 more spectators by 1980 (though the majority of the screenings most likely happened between 1967 and 1969).

The film positions itself against the mainstream proletarian subject matter in a very ostentatious manner, with Ruxandra's character insulting Șerban (Ștefan Iordache) – one of the men she regularly goes out with – by saying he may have seen “too many Romanian films with engineers”, when he demonstrates he is incapable of nuances and of cathartic engagement with a theatre play they see together. In the ideology promoted by those kinds of films, everything is planned, everything is calculated, so as to maximise the results to the benefit of the whole of society. In *A Film with a Charming Girl*, Ruxandra unabashedly states that “only the unpredictable is interesting”, another (more subtle) hit at the state's propensity toward organising the individuals' lives.

Some critics, such as Popescu, consider that the film ideologically harmless, and in line with the new morality promoted by socialism, illustrated by Ruxandra's failed attempts to make it in show-business and make a living for herself, a failure for which one of the girl's suitors didactically admonishes her toward the end of the film: “To succeed in life, being a charming girl is not enough”. However, the freshness of the cinematic approach (the discontinuous and anti-classical narrative, the jazz-like musical score, the sometimes improvisational, sometimes poetic dialogue and acting style), combined with the unrelenting fascination of the camera with Pîslaru, as well as the strength and the complexity of her character, make this film stand out as completely antagonistic in relation to the dominant functional-realist cinematic discourse of the time.

It is difficult to see Ruxandra as an exponent of the strong socialist woman, and yet she bears the imprints of the type of woman the socialist morality was eager to put forward. She is seldom less than the equal of men, and she categorically refuses the idea of woman being the property of man (even symbolically): “I want to be free, to live how I like, to die how I like”, she utters in the first act of the film, a mantra which she lives up to throughout the film. However, she lacks the desirable status for the typical socialist woman: she has never had a job, nor does she actually want one, and she is not preoccupied with the welfare of the wider community. At the same time, she shows more determination and assertiveness than that female prototype could ever have. Her free spirit categorically translates into her approach to romance and courtship. She does not hesitate to inform a potential suitor that *she* would call on *him* (by *her* own initiative, *not* his). At the same time, she is open to new experiences, including romantic ones: she nonchalantly and playfully tells a male passer-by that “[she] will go anywhere [with him]”.

All of this is even more apparent when she's put in contrast with a slightly older, but certainly more socially “appropriate” type of woman. The morning after she spends the night with a male friend in the barracks of a factory on the outskirts of Bucharest, a colleague of her friend drives Ruxandra back to town. The man, who has plans to take his wife for a drive further out in the country, stops to pick her up in the city centre. However, Ruxandra, holding tight to her bouquet of carnations, refuses to get out of the car to make room for the other woman, as she has not reached her desired destination. The make-up and the costumes highlight the contrast between the two women. Ruxandra wears dark colours, in dainty and fashionable cuts, almost replicating her

short, flapper-style bobcut. The older woman wears a chequered buttoned-up blouse, a scarf round her neck, white gloves and a pencil skirt, her bouffant hairstyle reminiscent of a school headmistress. After she confronts Ruxandra for refusing to get out of the car, the woman calmly but insinuatingly asks her whether she usually accepts carnations for her nastiness, to which the young woman replies “we accept anything, just like any other woman”. One can almost read this line as a feminist critique of the socialist state and woman’s submissive status within it, although the censorship probably read it as an expression of Ruxandra's moral looseness. The older woman then goes on to ask: “Do you think you can afford anything? [...] Do you think you're entitled to everything?”. Her intention is clearly rhetorical, but Ruxandra immediately gives an affirmative answer. Nothing can put her down, even as she’s picking up her scattered carnations off the pavement, framed in a medium shot against the Bucharest replica of the Arc de Triomphe. Such a strong female character, natural and spontaneous, unrepressed and uninhibited, going against convention and norm, and even sexually liberated (though rarely at a declarative level), is a notable exception not just in the Romanian cinema of the 1960s, but in Romanian cinema overall.

It is also important to note how Bratu's camera constructs Ruxandra as an object to be desired, more or less illustrating the voyeuristic mode of Laura Mulvey's “male gaze”<sup>219</sup>. A series of fluid long shots shows Ruxandra crossing the street, as she plays the protagonist in a public interest advertisement regarding safe driving. It is both the character's appearance (particularly her bare legs) as well as the structure of the advertisement (including a voiceover saying in a serious tone: “Grown men, when in an

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<sup>219</sup> Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. In *Screen*, volume 16, issue 3 (1975): 6-18.



intersection pay attention *only* to traffic!’’) that hint at the character's desirability on the one hand, but also at Margareta Pîslaru's desirability as the embodiment of that character. Later in the film, fashion and camera once more conspire to achieve this effect: a low medium shot of Ruxandra, wearing a lace blouse, draws attention to her breasts – a rather brave and uncommon thing to see in Romanian films of the time. Even more provocatively, and cinematically more interesting, but also inadvertently validating Mulvey's work on the male gaze in Hitchcock's films, is a scene toward the end of the film, where Ruxandra, while working on a television set, wanders among cardboard versions of herself in various disguises, while wearing a long black sequined corset dress and a long blonde wig, reminiscent of Brigitte Bardot and Veronica Lake or, perhaps above all, of Anita Ekberg's Sylvia in *La dolce vita*. Again, during state socialism, this mode of looking at the female body is something rather striking in Romanian cinema, men usually being the ones displayed on screen in this manner, albeit for identification purposes rather than as objects of desire, something which I will investigate in the next chapter.

## **V.8. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the ways in which politics, film criticism and films themselves intertwined and interacted in terms of representing sex and sexuality in the 1960s, a decade of political and ideological semi-relaxation in state socialist Romania. On the one hand, it has found that Romanian audiences retained some access to Western-produced films and television, and that film stars continued to carry a significant erotic appeal for these audiences. By contrast, state-sanctioned film criticism aimed to disrupt these tendencies by arguing that the objects of affection are either

representative of lower quality cinema, or, in full-on Cold War style, by building the case for the decline of Western capitalism through pinpointing manifestations of sexuality as a symptom of it. The ideological arguments to censor sexuality did not repurpose its meaning, but instead redirected it and repositioned it as alien to socialist culture.

At the same time, by analysing two Romanian films in detail, the chapter has tried to demonstrate how the cinematic treatment of sexuality both reinforced and subverted the socialist ideology dominating the decade. By looking at *A Midsummer Day's Smile*, I have built connections to representations in films of the 1950s, by showing the continuity in the socialist attempts to encourage gender equality, which were often on the verge of uniformisation, but I have also tried to support a more subversive reading of the male protagonist and his reluctance to conform to the trajectory already decided for him by society. In my analysis of *A Film with a Charming Girl*, I have focussed on the non-conformist image of femininity and autonomous sexuality projected by the character of Ruxandra, which together with the filmmaking techniques that go against the conventions of socialist realism, led to the film being “shelved” for decades. In parallel to the critical discourse repositioning visible sexuality as specifically Western, the socialist regime programmatically suppressed films when they attempted to make sex and sexuality visible in a national context.

## **Chapter VI: Postcards from the National Hero Age. The '70s Are Closing In**

The 1970s, particularly in their latter half, marked a turn from the slight liberalisation of the 1960s toward a more nationalistic, inward-looking approach as far as Romanian politics and society as a whole were concerned. In this chapter, I will analyse the ways in which cinema was shaped by this, specifically in relation to their treatment of sex and sexuality, which, I argue, returned to the highly repressed approach observed in the cinema of the '50s, albeit due to different, but equally powerful, ideological factors. In particular, I will look at how stardom and film stars' seductive appeal was validated by their conformation to political and historical ideologies directly linked to the concerns of the Communist Party.

### **VI.1. “Neo-stalinism” and the Cult of Personality**

During the 1970s, Nicolae Ceausescu formalised his position as supreme leader of the Romanian state by creating the function of President of the Republic for himself.

Ceausescu's ascension as the ultimate public figure – not just political, but also cultural – began in the very first years of the decade, when the so-called “cult of personality” first showed its teeth. Ceausescu, obviously encouraged and validated by members of the upper and middle echelons of the Communist apparatus, went on to become the essentialised image of the Romanian man (he was often called, in the official and propagandistic discourses, “the first man of the country”), the one to be revered, and the model which all citizens should aspire to be. This cult of personality later expanded to

include Ceausescu's wife, Elena, and the pair became the pattern onto which all Romanian couples should be modelled on: erotically cleansed, but progress-oriented and reproductively productive.

The turning point from the liberalisation of the late 1960s and the beginnings of Ceausescu's cult of personality were both seemingly marked by a month-long visit he made to China, North Korea, North Vietnam and Mongolia in 1971. Just weeks after this June visit, Ceausescu (presumably in collaboration with his close entourage) elaborated and published a document titled *Proposals for Measures to Improve the Political-Ideological Activity, for the Marxist-Leninist Education of the Party Members and of All Working People*<sup>220</sup>, informally known as *The July Theses*. Several historians, including Cioroianu, Tismaneanu and Verdery, refer to this plan as being rather Maoist, marking the beginning of a small-scale Cultural Revolution.

Essentially, in order to fill in the alleged gaps in the political, ideological, educational and cultural activity of the Communist Party, Ceausescu came up with a list of 17 measures aimed at intensifying “the revolutionary combativeness and the militant spirit” of the socialist education of the masses. The measures strengthened the party control in promoting the communist ideology to the masses, as well as in aggressively fighting the influences of “the bourgeois ideology, the retrograde mentalities”, while highlighting “the successes obtained by the Romanian people” throughout history<sup>221</sup>.

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<sup>220</sup> Ceausescu, Nicolae. *Propuneri de masuri pentru imbunatatirea activitatii politico-ideologice, de educare marxist-leninista a membrilor de partid, a tuturor oamenilor muncii*. Bucharest: Editura Politica, 1971.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

Culture was clearly referred to in Ceausescu's intervention: "art must [now] serve the people, the country, the socialist society"<sup>222</sup>. In practice, the plan of measures stipulated that on both radio and television, priority was to be given to the promotion of films, plays, and music shows from the national repertoire, particularly from "the new, socialist one". "Valuable oeuvres from socialist countries" were to balance out the national production, while those cultural products "that cultivate ideas and principles that are strangers to our philosophy and our morals, the spirit of violence, the bourgeois way of life, harmful mentalities for the education of the young"<sup>223</sup> were completely eliminated. In regards to the film industry and film distribution, Ceausescu's plan overtly prohibited "films that cultivate violence and vulgarity, that propagate the bourgeois way of life", while also specifically advising toward limiting certain genre films, e.g. *policier* and action adventure.

It is not surprising then to see similar attitudes toward sex and sexuality in Romania of the 1970s (and, later, in the '80s) as those manifest during the Maoist Cultural Revolution in China, when, according to Emily Honig, "to discuss any aspect of personal life, romantic relationships, or sex was considered bourgeois and hence taboo"<sup>224</sup>. The same atmosphere of secrecy (or, rather, of "emptying out [of] the public discourse on sex"<sup>225</sup>), which is one of the assumptions of this thesis, was also apparent in Maoist China, and would become one of the staples of Ceausescu's rule in the two

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Honig, Emily. "Socialist Sex. The Cultural Revolution Revisited". In *Modern China*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2003), 143.

<sup>225</sup> Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China". In *Spaces of their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, edited by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 146.

decades before the fall of Communism. Chinese sexual education guides, obviously sanctioned by the state, while having some circulation in the '50s and early '60s, were no longer published during the Cultural Revolution, according to Honig. What is revelatory is Honig's observation on various informal accounts of non-marital romantic and sexual relationships punished by representatives of authority, always on the basis of “unwritten” rules. “To the extent that the state played a role in *silencing sexuality*, it did so through its own silence, which must have spoken volumes to local leaders and ordinary citizens”<sup>226</sup>, Honig explains. Later in the chapter, I will attempt to explore the degree to which this observation may be validly transposed to Ceausescu's Romania as well.

Nevertheless, Chinese public discourses and artistic narratives also eliminated the possibility of romantic relationships between the sexes and transform them into “comradely associations”<sup>227</sup>, something which, to a certain degree, would also become apparent in the Romanian cultural output of the '70s and '80s, including films, as I shall discuss later. Before that though, I would like to have a look at how specifically this Mao-infused ideology manifested itself in social terms, and how the official discourse on sex and sexuality was shaped by it.

## **VI.2. Sexual Education, Abortions and the Ineffectiveness of Ideology**

During the period of state socialism, sex education in Romania was focussed on the biological and anatomical aspect of reproduction, and the discussion was rarely under

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<sup>226</sup> Honig, *Socialist Sex*, 154.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

the assumption that young people may be actually having sex. It has already been established that the Orthodox Church has been reduced to borderline illegality in earlier decades – although this assertion is slightly more complex, as in order to preserve its existence, the Church becomes complicit to staying silent in the public sphere. However, the teachings of the official sex education guides were very much in the same moral vein, preaching abstinence rather than offer truly helpful advice on dealing with sex if or when it happened.

Perhaps boosted by the slight liberalisation of the 1960s, as well as by the anti-abortion legislation introduced around the same time, a few guides for the young generation were published by the beginning of the 1970s, though the range of their distribution remains largely unknown, and it was very likely limited.

One such guide was *To the Young*, written by Dr. Adriana Deculescu, edited by the Institute for Hygiene within the Ministry of Health, and published in 1968 in 45,000 copies. In its introduction, the medical professional openly admitted that her pamphlet would not approach “the multiple aspects of the relations between sexes”<sup>228</sup> in detail. It focussed more on teaching those “phenomena that happen within the body at the age of transformation from child to adult”, as well as on making apparent “the connection between the transformations of puberty and the changes they bring in behaviour, in thinking, in action and in feelings”, so that “the personal characteristics and the individual inclinations would find the most adequate and conscious manifestation, based on the realities of life”<sup>229</sup>. In other words, the guide set out to provide knowledge, but

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<sup>228</sup> Deculescu, Adriana. *Celor tineri*. Bucharest: Editura Medicala, 1968, 3.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

only of a particular type, one designated to enable and ensure the good functioning of the mechanisms of “biopower”, in Foucault's words. It is a type of knowledge that was validated (or “adequated”) by the state institutions, where what was left out was deemed as non-essential, when in fact it could be more important than what was provided.

This is by no means an isolated case, and is reflective of what Marcuse called “politicalization of ethics”<sup>230</sup>, in reference to Soviet society, whereby new ethical principles (including sexuality) were in fact dictated by the political sphere and the dominant ideology. As historian Cristian Vasile argues, the Romanian Communist Party gradually imposed (or “recommended”) that this type of pamphlets held marriage and family as their principal topics<sup>231</sup>. Most of the examples Vasile identifies (*The Book of Young Married People* by Dan Abulius, *Advice for the Young Married People* by Ioan Vinti, Radu Negulescu, Cornel Pascu and Dan Titieni, *The Pedagogical Preparation of Teenagers for Family Life* by Valentina T. Liciu, *The Conjugal Couple. Harmony and Disharmony* by Iolanda Mitrofan) were published in the 1970s, reinforcing the idea that this decade marked a conscious silencing of the discussion of sexual issues under the more morally desirable topic of love and family.

Going into more depth in regards to the specific topics discussed by Deculescu in *To the Young*, it is clear that sex and sexuality, when manifest, were projected as being dangerous and full of risks. On the one hand, Deculescu argues, “the use of physical and nervous energy demanded by the sexual act [will lead to] spoiling the organism from

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<sup>230</sup> Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 220.

<sup>231</sup> Vasile, Cristian. “Comunistii si viata sexuala a romanilor”.  
<http://www.lapunkt.ro/2013/03/01/comunistii-si-viata-sexuala-a-romanilor/>. October, 17, 2013.



the energy needed for the organic maturation; to imbalances in and the weakening of the nervous system through repeated overwork; to brakes in the development of intellectual and physical qualities”<sup>232</sup>. Under this guise of a scientific discourse, the author in fact followed and reinforced the official discourse that pleaded for the active involvement of all members of society within the society itself, to ensure progress. Should one “waste” their energy in sexual pursuits, their ability to make a valuable contribution to the economy and to their social environment would be heavily and negatively impacted. Also, the alleged impact of manifest sexuality on the proper development of the individual also hints at the fact that those young members of society who do act on their sexual instinct are somehow lesser, or at least less well-rounded, human beings. To preempt this “underdevelopment”, the adolescent must therefore refrain from acting on their desires, which is, allegedly, far from impossible: “in reality, except some rare cases of pathological sexuality [...], there are no *irrepressible inclinations*”<sup>233</sup>. Freud’s repressive hypothesis thus becomes a repressive axiom, which governs all socialist bodies, according to the system that Deculescu represents and legitimises.

Furthermore, culture (including cinema) was seen as having a highly probable destabilising effect as far as sexual abstinence was concerned. The psychology of the individual was where the real work needed to be done, especially as far as imagination was concerned, so as to avoid the possibility of sexual instincts being channelled erotically. Thus, if abstinence was seen as key to economic productivity and social usefulness, it is no wonder that sexuality was absent from public discourses, as this absence makes abstinence that much easier. “[...] The thoughts, desires and

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<sup>232</sup> Deculescu, *Celor tineri*, 58.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

preoccupations that always gravitate around the sexual problem, the films, readings and discussions with an erotic character only stir curiosity and maintain the organism in a state of tension and excitement”<sup>234</sup>, Deculescu explains, while later in the book openly asserting the fact that “the sexual instinct has a dangerous potential”<sup>235</sup>. Access to any sort of sexually-themed cultural products was thus viewed as having the effect of risking the stimulation of curiosity, and in turn the production of knowledge. While it is extremely unlikely that Deculescu's booklet had an actual influence on censorship policies, it is highly relevant as an exponent of the socialist way of thinking, which saw bodies in a state of excitement and tension as being dangerous to the status quo, whereas apathetic or numbed bodies were easier to control, just as minds with no access to knowledge were.

It is unlikely that these guidelines had the desired effect though, as Deculescu herself admits, in a deficiency of logic (or just another illustration of the totalitarian “doublethink”). She does not acknowledge the reality of the admission and its true causes though. What may be the cause, she asks, that certain young women (note the gender restriction applied) from urban areas, start their sex life early on, without the justification of “any objective argument”? “The answer is only one: the lack of dignity and moral sense, the desire to affirm their independence and the sick curiosity toward the ‘prohibited pleasures’!”<sup>236</sup>, Deculescu opines. This admits the possibility of effects contrary to the desired ones. “Prohibiting pleasure” only leads to increasing temptation, a hypothesis supported by Foucault's ideas of power, which rather encourages than

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

suppresses the diversification of sex and sexual practices.

In the context of the anti-abortion decree, released only one year before the publication of Deculescu's guide, she mentions no contraceptive measures other than abstinence. Presumably, this tactic was meant to further effect the impossibility of an alternative to abstinence, suggesting that the only way to avoid unwanted pregnancies was to refrain from an active sex life altogether, another significant proof of the systematic refusal of sexual knowledge by an economically and ideologically-oriented state apparatus.

As mentioned above, Deculescu's pseudo-study was only one example of the few “sex education” guides published in the late '60s and the '70s in Romania. Erin Biebuyck discusses a few others, and her conclusions are very similar to the ones drawn above. Interestingly though, she also finds a discussion on homosexuality in another 1968 book, *Sexual Life and Marriage* by Maria Alecu-Ungureanu. Essentially, Biebuyck argues, Alecu-Ungureanu deems any non-procreative sex as “inherently abnormal and disordered”<sup>237</sup>, while labelling homosexuality as “a sign of profound neurosis, [or the] consequence of a psychic trauma”. While not entirely dismissing the physiological aspects of homosexuality, the Romanian author minimises them, adding “intoxication with alcohol, or family influences” as other possible “causes” for a non-normative sexual orientation. Biebuyck also observes the use of “more subtle tactics to exclude homosexuality and non-reproductive heterosexual sex”<sup>238</sup> from defining “normal sex”. Thus, Alecu-Ungureanu sees the sex act as strictly made up of vaginal intercourse,

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<sup>237</sup> Biebuyck, Erin. “The Collectivisation of Pleasure. Normative Sexuality in Post-1966 Romania”. In *Aspasia*, volume 4 (2010): 49-70, 55.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

which is at least one step (albeit a very small one) ahead of Deculescu, who hesitates to actually describe what a sexual act might actually involve.

In an article titled *The Eradication of the Instinct of Pleasure*, Mihaela Miroiu, one of the few feminist intellectuals in post-1990 Romania, informally discusses what sex life in Communism was like, particularly for the generation that grew into adolescents and young adults by 1971, of which she was part of<sup>239</sup>. As if to illustrate the lack of effectiveness of the types of discourses discussed above, Miroiu remembers some of the subversive strategies that a significant part of the young and urban Romanian population used in the 1970s (and later on in the 1980s) so as to hold on to even the smallest pleasures that sex had to offer.

The instinct of pleasure [...] could not be eradicated. There were functional contraband networks for contraceptives from neighbouring states, onto which the pro-natalist policy did not burst: Yugoslavia, Hungary, the USSR. It's true that medical advice and risk tests were out of the question. The female pharmacists would prepare 'cocoa butter', some kind of spermicide suppositories that would awkwardly melt. Sex was restricted to the certainly infertile days (about which we heard clandestinely). Abstinence was cultivated as a contraceptive means, even more so than in the dreams of contemporary American Republicans. Those that had connections and 'generosity' were paying heavy money to have C-sections so that they gain the right to abortion. I know women who had hysterectomies done,

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<sup>239</sup> Miroiu, Mihaela. "Eradicarea instinctului placerii". <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/dileme-line/articol/eradicarea-instinctului-placerii>. December, 14, 2014.

so that they no longer felt eroticism as the sword of Damocles.<sup>240</sup>

This shows that, in practice, “the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle”<sup>241</sup> is not always possible (although attempts to do so can be an equally traumatic). It also illustrates what Anthony Giddens calls the creation of “spaces for mobilisation and countervailing power”, which are produced “by the very expansion of surveillance”<sup>242</sup>. However, while adventurous, brave and, seen through this nostalgic lens, quite humorous, Miroiu's account cannot be extended to incorporate the whole of the population, and unfortunately there were too many cases where the subversive quality of those spaces for mobilisation ended up in tragedy. Since abortions did not stop but rather moved from the public sphere to the underground, they were often performed in unsanitary conditions, by unqualified individuals. This led to an increase in the abortion-related mortality, so that a few years after Decree 770 this was ten times higher than in any other European country<sup>243</sup>. While in 1966 the number of maternal deaths caused by abortion-related complications was 64, this doubled by the following year (the year of Decree 770), then steadily increased to a peak of 469 by 1977, and went even higher during the 1980s<sup>244</sup>.

### **VI.3. A World of Sex. Global Cinema in the 1970s**

I would like to briefly contextualise the discussion on sex and sexuality in the Romanian film culture of the 1970s by summarising the main developments that took

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud*. London and New York: Routledge, 1987 [1955], 15.

<sup>242</sup> Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 173.

<sup>243</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*, 144.

<sup>244</sup> Jinga, *Identitate, social si cotidian...*, 177.

place during this decade in other film cultures. The sexual revolution of the 1960s, as well as the changing modes of production throughout the decade, in parallel with the advent of television and the implicit diversification of audiences across the globe, led to a surge in the number of films that prominently feature nudity and sex in the 1970s, particularly as far as Europe was concerned.

America started even earlier than that, with the first specifically sex-themed films produced in the late 1950s, reaching a climax in the '60s. Russ Meyer, one of the leading exponents of sexploitation<sup>245</sup>, started out in 1959 with *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, which paves the way for the so-called “nudie-cuties”, independently produced films which openly show exaggerated female nudity (almost exclusively). Low-budget, and more often than not lacking any artistic qualities, these films were successfully (and profitably) shown in so-called grindhouse theatres, or adult theatres, across the United States, though audiences lost interest by the mid-60s. In parallel with the nudie-cuties, the '60s also see the advent of sexploitation films, not least due to the 1969 Supreme Court ruling that the (now) cult Swedish film *Jag ar nyfiken – en film i gult / I Am Curious (Yellow)* (Vilgot Sjoman, 1969) was not obscene due to its educational context. This does not mean that sexploitation films had an educational purpose, but rather use the format of *I Am Curious (Yellow)* as an excuse to promote images and ideas of unrestrained sexuality, in the same low-budget, poor-quality vein as the nudie-cuties, at the same time adding elements of violence and subversion targeted at the social conventions.

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<sup>245</sup> Perhaps more widely known for films such as *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (USA, 1965), the story of three go-go dancers on a kidnapping and murder spree.

What is perhaps even more relevant is that the sexploitation films of the '60s paved the way for *porno chic*, or the Golden Age of Porn in American Cinema, that dominated the 1970s. With Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie* (USA, 1969) as a precursor, the porno chic era saw the advent of wide theatrical releases for adult erotic films that explicitly depicted sex. The now legendary *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, USA, 1972) became a box-office success, while Damiano's follow-up, *The Devil in Miss Jones* (USA, 1973) made the top ten highest grossing pictures of the year it was released.

On this side of the Atlantic, the '60s already saw the emergence of the *Carry On* franchise in Britain, a series of comedies in which sexual innuendoes take place of pride. In Italy, a series of soft-core erotic films were independently produced in the 1970s, due mainly to a relaxation of censorship, giving birth to the *commedia sexy all'italiana*, mixing broad humour with explicit sexual nudity, not entirely dissimilar to the *Carry On* films. The Italian film industry also dabbled in Nazisploitation films, in which elements of sado-masochism were prevalent. Tinto Brass's career in erotic cinema basically began with *Salon Kitty* (Italy, 1976), a class above the North American Nazisploitation productions such as *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, Canada, 1975). Brass then went on to direct the erotic epic *Caligula* (1979, Italy / USA). Inspired by the *commedia sexy*, Mexico also produced its own *sexicomedias* (or *Ficheras* films), sexploitation films with a national flavour, but also with strong influences coming in from the north of the border (USA).

Film industries closer to the Romanian border also showed much more openness to sex and sexuality than in previous decades. In Turkey, the phenomenon known as

Turkification (the remaking of films produced by other national industries, usually with lesser means) included productions from the *commedia sexy* genre, such as *Man of the Year / Homo Eroticus* (Marco Vicario, Italy, 1971), which in the Turkish version becomes *Five Chicks One Rooster / Bes Tavuk Bir Horoz* (Oksal Pekmezoglu, 1974). However, as Savas Arslan suggests, unlike the Italian original, the Turkish film was not just a simple sex comedy, but also had elements of social commentary, such as the heterosexual relations between characters from the lower classes and those from the upper classes. Films such as *Five Chicks...* were part of what Arslan identifies as the first wave of sex films in Turkish cinema, characterised by “gratuitous nudity and obscene jokes as well as comical ‘bed scenes’”<sup>246</sup>. On the other hand, sex films from the second wave, in the late '70s, “became increasingly obscene, without being explicit enough to qualify as hardcore pornography”<sup>247</sup>. In both these phases, the popularity of these films in Turkey was immense, with more than half of the total of 225 films released in 1975 being sex films<sup>248</sup>, although, as tends to be the case with contemporary Hollywood, the main audience for these films were young male spectators<sup>249</sup>.

Eastern Europe saw further diversification and depth in terms of how sexuality was treated on screen. While banned in his home country, Dusan Makavejev’s *W.R. Misterije organizma / W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) was a powerful and subversive dialogue with the psychoanalytical writings of Wilhelm Reich, more specifically focussed on the ways in which sexuality and politics intertwine (in this

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<sup>246</sup> Arslan, Savas. *Cinema in Turkey. A New Critical History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 114.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 110.



particular case, the politics of the socialist state). Beyond the Yugoslav Black Wave, even the Polish and Czechoslovak cinemas of the 1970s saw an increase in the acceptability of displaying sexual organs and sexual intercourse on screen, according to Ewa Mazierska, who, in the case of Czechoslovakia, attributes this phenomenon to “the strengthening of political censorship and the promotion of consumerist and hedonistic attitudes by the state, as a way to lull citizens into political inactivity”<sup>250</sup> (the higher aim as well as the tactics used to achieve it were very different to the Romanian case, and this distinction will be explored in detail later on). As far as Polish cinema is concerned, the quantitative increase in the depictions of sex on screen is attributed to the requirements of the state that filmmakers produced more commercially successful films. Once more, this starkly contrasts with the way Sergiu Nicolaescu's suggestions at the end of the 1960s (to introduce “sexiness” in films in order to attract bigger audiences and increase their financial viability) were received by Nicolae Ceausescu and the rest of the Communist party. Mazierska concludes that the “fashionability” of sex in 1970s (and 1980s) cinema in Poland and Czechoslovakia was also indebted to the changing societal attitudes, which rendered romantic love as outdated. In Romania's case, the opposite would be true, with romantic, non-sexual love being promoted as desirable (and with high productive value), as we shall see below.

#### **VI.4. Sexuality in Foreign Films and their Romanian Distribution and Reception**

The trend toward eroticism displayed throughout national cinemas of the late 1960s and then the 1970s was minimally addressed by the *Cinema* magazine – which, it is worth

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<sup>250</sup> Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak cinema*, 161.

reiterating, was highly popular in Romania despite being edited and published by the state. Unsurprisingly, the stand it took was against this widespread popularisation of sexual openness in global cinema.

In 1970, *Cinema* published an essay by leading Polish film critic Jerzy Plazewski, titled *Eros and Psyche*, which attributed the worldwide trend in eroticising the screen to an “infantilisation” of the global film culture, and pleaded for more “subtle” ways of cinematically handling the theme of love and eroticism. Plazewski makes use of demagogical tools and, at times, even offensive language to diminish the impact and the importance of the newly found cinematic sexual openness. He categorises the “absolute sexual honesty” as an obsession, further ridiculing the filmmakers that dealt with such topics by putting their attributes of braveness and lack of prejudice in inverted commas, and accusing them of “feverishly searching for sexual perversions never before recorded on film”<sup>251</sup>. Some of the filmmakers Plazewski refers to include the Swedish directors Vilgot Sjoman (for the explicitness of his *I Am Curious* films) and Lars Goring (for allowing a glimpse of a penis in his 1965 film *Guilt / Tills. med Gunilla mand. kvall o tisd*), Brazilian Ruy Guerra for displaying a nude female body in *The Unscrupulous Ones / Os cafajestes* (Brazil, 1962), and Jean-Pierre Bastid (pseudonym Jean-Loup Grosdard) for his *Massacre for an Orgy / Massacre pour une orgie* (Luxembourg, 1966). All this sexual honesty, the Polish critic thinks, came down to filmmakers' inability to tell the “truth” about the essence of the relations between man and woman, which he suggests was love, the elusive and all-encompassing love. Instead, Plazewski pleads for other techniques to depict love on screen: metonymy and synecdoche, such as

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<sup>251</sup> Plazewski, Jerzy. “Eros si Psyche”. In *Cinema*, no. 1 (1970), 15.

waves breaking or hands holding tight, but also the attenuation and even the shortening of erotic scenes. The publication of this essay by *Cinema* is significant in that it shows how film sexuality was perceived in the Eastern bloc, and how these perceptions travelled transnationally within the bloc. It also validates the cinematic silencing of the sexual act by disguising it under the pretext of failing to tell a “truth”, which due to its ambiguity and evasiveness was that much easier to define and redefine according to the dominant ideology.

The silencing of films that contained sexual acts and unbound eroticism became a characteristic of the Romanian film industry throughout the 1970s and later into the 1980s, although it was rarely acknowledged as a sustained and assumed effort on the producers and distributors' part. It is rather through the absence of such films on Romanian screens (in tandem with the complicity of the critics) that this silencing occurred.

The early 1970s were marked by a revisionist approach to the distribution of films with vague sexual content in Romanian cinemas (as it happened in the late 1960s). In retrospect, this was now seen as dangerous, and critics proceeded to draw the public's attention to the “artificiality” and “sterility” of such films. One such example is Ana Maria Narti's 1970 essay on the success that *Valley of the Dolls* (Mark Robson, USA, 1967) had with Romanian audiences, which should make one reflect, according to the critic. Essentially, Narti calls *Valley...* an exponent of the so-called “white telephone” genre (originally designating films made in Italy under Mussolini in the 1930s, glamorising the lifestyle of Italian high society), and shows her disappointment with the

fact that such “cheap Hollywood delights” or “sub-artistic products”<sup>252</sup> should attract a high number of spectators. Admittedly, the film had not been a critical success in the West either. However, it is plausible that its crucifixion in the Romanian film press was also caused by its racy content rather than just its aesthetic attributes. Nevertheless, the fact that it was perceived as a success with the public (though figures to support this are not available) is proof that the audiences did have an appetite for films that at least dealt with themes related to sexuality, even if censorship would remove those scenes that depict sexual acts openly, e.g. Sharon Tate's love scene in the film<sup>253</sup>.

It is actually not clear whether *Valley of the Dolls* was screened in Romanian cinemas close to its original release date, or whether it was delayed and only seen in the early 1970s. This practice of screening films several years after their release became increasingly common in the 1970s and 1980s and, while economic and industry arguments can be brought forth to explain this practice, one should not exclude the possibility that the state used the passing of time as just another “screen” designed to appease the appetite for undesirable films. A limited release years after the original hype died down could avoid claims of censorship, and could provide the illusion of openness, while actually ensuring a dwindling of the interest in such productions. This is, of course, only a hypothesis. Entirely undesirable films, such as *Last Tango in Paris* for example, were denied distribution altogether.

The sexploitation trend was also touched upon by the critics of *Cinema* magazine, but this was done in a mystifying manner, as the term was either misunderstood or

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<sup>252</sup> Narti, Ana Maria. “Mirificele telefoane albe”. In *Cinema*, no. 2 (1970), 32.

<sup>253</sup> Popescu, *Filmul surd in Romania muta*, 182.

intentionally misinterpreted in order to validate a traditional heteronormative approach to sexuality for its readers. In a small intervention called simply *Sexploitation*, author Maria Aldea associated the term with homosexual relationships, which in turn she put side by side with sadism and “abnormality”. To support her stance, she mentions films such as *Secret Ceremony* (Joseph Losey, UK, 1968), which had Elizabeth Taylor and Mia Farrow in an ambiguously lesbian liaison, *Staircase* (Stanley Donen, France / USA, UK, 1969), with Rex Harrison and Richard Burton as two ageing gay men, and *The Sergeant* (John Flynn, USA, 1968), with Rod Steiger as a master sergeant dealing with his latent homosexuality. Aldea does not go into detail on any of these films, and it is more likely than not that these were not (and would not be) exhibited in Romanian cinemas. The discourse is, on the one hand, vague, presumably in order to not stir anyone’s interest in the theme of the films, but on the other hand, it takes an aggressive stand against them. Heavily editorial, Aldea's intervention accuses such films of ignoring “the Dr Jekyll in man (the principle of good)” while filling the earth with “the silhouette of Mr Hyde (the principle of evil in man)”<sup>254</sup>. Once more, this was both a representation and an enforcement of the dominant ideology of the time, which equated sexual difference with sexual aberration and with “moral misery”<sup>255</sup>.

The subversion of such “delicate” themes in the critical discourse was doubled by their official removal from the general public discourse. For example, Romanian state censorship edited the East German production *Her Third / Der Dritte* (Egon Gunther, 1972), while not completely withdrawing it from distribution on Romanian screens (it is, after all, an almost entirely heteronormative narrative of a woman searching for a

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<sup>254</sup> Aldea, Maria. “Sexploitation”. In *Cinema*, no.1 (1971): 33.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

male partner). The censors cut a scene in which the heroine shares a kiss with her female best friend. The film was almost banned in East Germany (as many of Gunther's films have been), and while there is little evidence that the same scene is the only reason, there is speculation that the German censors in fact escaped the subtleties of the film, which may hint at the possible lesbian relationship as the real relationship the heroine is looking for<sup>256</sup>. The film being allowed distribution in Romania is proof that Romanian censors also missed this point, and shows how censorship really did lack substance and discernment, being only focussed on removing the obvious from vision while subtleties may be (inadvertently) left in to do their work, with and within discerning viewers.

Being denied full exposure to films dealing openly with sex and sexuality, Romanian audiences found a substitute in imported melodramas. In the 1970s, melodramas became an alternative to the politically- and historically-themed national productions (detailed below), which offered, in their vast majority, emotionally sterile experiences (though with some exceptions). Melodrama had never been an unpopular film genre in Romania, and the imports of the 1960s continued to be a success in the first half of the following decade. A survey conducted in 1970 by the *Cinema* magazine found that a Sarita Montiel film, *The Sin of Love / Pecado de amor* (Luis Cesar Amadori, Spain / Italy / Argentina, 1961), a musical melodrama about an artist falling in love with a married politician, was still in the top 3 of the public's favourite films. So popular was Montiel that another of her films, *This Woman / Esa mujer* (Mario Camus, Spain, 1969) placed fifth in the public's favourites, according to *Cinema*. Montiel's popularity can be

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<sup>256</sup> Morton, Jim. "Her Third". <http://eastgermancinema.com/2011/01/11/her-third/>. February, 21, 2016.

explained by the fact that, despite achieving the status of a “sex symbol in Francoist Spain”<sup>257</sup> by playing usually fallen women, her characters always had redemptive qualities and an inherent goodness<sup>258</sup>, which might also be a reason why her films were approved by the Romanian film distributor.

According to the survey, first place was taken by another melodrama, at the time almost two decades old, but apparently still resonant with romance-deprived Romanian audiences. This was *The Right to Be Born / El derecho de nacer* (Zacarias Gomez Urquiza, Mexico, 1952). It is extremely interesting to consider the possibility of this film being insistently promoted and repeatedly distributed in state cinemas and on state television due to its ideological implications. The main focus of the film is a pregnant unmarried woman trying to get an abortion, while her doctor hopes to change her mind and reassert the “right to life”. In the context of the anti-abortion decree, this is not insignificant. Second place in the survey was occupied by Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers / Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Italy / France, 1960), which had made Alain Delon and Annie Girardot hugely popular with Romanian audiences in the previous decade.

Melodramas of a different kind also saw a surge in popularity in 1970s Romania. Initially facilitated by cultural exchanges between India and the Soviet Union (the complexity of which is explored in depth by Sudha Rajagopalan<sup>259</sup>), Bollywood

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<sup>257</sup> Morcillo, Aurora G. *The Seduction of Modern Spain: The Female Body and the Francoist Body Politic*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2010, 244.

<sup>258</sup> Aurora Morcillo suggests that Montiel “embodied the good tramp”: “She was the other woman for whom any man would abandon his wife or fiancée. She was *the other* who struggled to become *the pure* and redeemed fallen woman”, *ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> Rajagopalan, Sudha. *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas. The Culture of Movie-going after Stalin*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.

productions travelled to Romanian screens, and swept audiences off their feet. Films such as *The Tramp / Awaara* (Raj Kapoor, India, 1951) or *Shree 420* (Raj Kapoor, India, 1955) had already propelled their actor-director to stardom throughout Eastern Europe, and opened the way for Indian cinema in the region. In 1970s Romania, two films were released that would hold audiences captive for decades to come<sup>260</sup>: *One Flower, Two Gardeners / Ek Phool Do Mali* (Devendra Goel, India, 1969) and *The Procession of Memories / Yaadon Ki Baaraat* (Nasir Husain, India, 1973). In a similar fashion to melodramas from other national cinemas, the popularity of Indian films with Romanian audiences brings forward a type of engagement with themes of film romance which can be characterised as de-sexualised and transmuted from the realm of sensations (both embodied on screen and “transmitted” through the screen) into that of platonic, idealised eroticism. Rajagopalan explains that it is the “moral propriety” put forth by Indian films that was appealing to Soviet audiences, and the common ideological framework might lead one to draw similar conclusions in regards to the Romanian audiences as well. Several of the filmgoers interviewed in Rajagopalan's book say they are attracted by the “clean” love depicted in Indian films, a “good, sincere love without aggressive sex... not some animal passion”<sup>261</sup>, one that coincides with “[the audiences'] worldview”. This proves, to an extent, that this morally pure worldview is a success achieved by the de-sexualised socialist ideology, but it is also possible that the popularity of the morally-driven Indian melodramas actually appealed to a romantic sensibility that was otherwise impossible to fulfil by what was shown on socialist screens. A propensity for desire, that does not find expression in sexuality depicted

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<sup>260</sup> The sustained popularity of *The Procession of Memories* would continue in the post-Communist era, a phenomenon analysed in Bradeanu, Adina and Rosie Thomas. “Indian Summer, Romanian Winter”. In *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2006): 141-146.

<sup>261</sup> Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 62.



openly in films, would thus be sublimated into an affection for the highs and lows of melodrama.

### **VI.5. The Male-Centric National Film Production**

Romanian film production in the 1970s was heavily influenced by the July Theses, and was therefore programatically directed toward the ideological potential held by the national history and its heroes, and away from any influences from the West. Thus, one can witness the rise of the epic genre film, on the one hand focussed on the fictionalised biographies of some rulers of the Romanian countries in medieval times (i.e. a long time before the countries would unite and become Romania), and on the other influenced by the success of American and European epic films in the 1960s and 1970s. However, while European films such as *Angelique* (referenced in the previous chapter) allow for the development of romantic storylines, even with a certain degree of nudity and raciness, this was not the case for Romanian films of the decade. The focus here became the heroism of the male leader (mirroring the political preoccupation to present Ceausescu as a model man), as an exponent and a reinforcement of national values, which were now at the core of the Romanian “cultural revolution”. Film in 1970s became almost exclusively male, promoting an image of strength of character and ability to sacrifice, almost always in conjunction with abstinence from any erotic pursuits, perceived to damage the inherent heroic quality of that male figure. As these characters were meant to become models of conduct and morality to aspire to, they would also carry the powerful message that progress, as well as social and economic success, were only possible by fully devoting oneself to them rather than to the “trivialities” of love and desire. An example of how these films worked to serve the

ideological dedication to the noble cause of the social struggle (fundamental to Ceausescu's desire of constructing the ideal socialist society) is detailed later in this chapter, in a case study of Sergiu Nicolaescu's *Michael the Brave*.

This male-centric approach reflected what happened behind the camera, as female writers and directors were virtually absent from the Romanian fiction film production of the 1970s (most of the active ones were either documentarians or working in animation and children's films, e.g. Elisabeta Bostan). One celebrated exception, and to this day one of the few Romanian female film directors, was Malvina Ursianu, who, while still drawing from national history in terms of theme (e.g. *The Soiree / Serata*, which she wrote and directed in 1971, is set on the night of 23 August 1944, when Romania withdrew from the alliance with Nazi Germany and took sides with the USSR), adds a certain degree of interiority and sensibility (albeit not in a completely detached manner from the dominant socialist ideology), that other filmmakers fail to achieve. However, Ursianu's approach to love and romance on screen does not stand out among Romanian films of the period. While indeed more introspective than the majority, the ways in which her films explore relationships and intimacy are often lyricised, and they platonicise desire rather than allow its expression.

This kind of lyricism was, in fact, completely in trend with both the thematic concerns advocated by the critics (and by the system overall) when it came to depicting love on screen. While miles away from the visibility displayed by the erotic trend in Western cinemas, it was not without its appeal, particularly when these films travelled transnationally to ideologically-related countries. The cultural influence and exchange

between the People's Republic of China and Romania became mutual once the Chinese Cultural Revolution ends, in 1976. Gheorghe Vitanidis' *Ciprian Porumbescu* (Romania, 1972), a romanticised biography of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian composer Ciprian Porumbescu, made the lead actor, 21-year-old Vlad Radescu, an extremely popular star in China, something that the late Romanian film critic Alex. Leo Serban was able to witness during his visit to China in 2004, when all of the Chinese people he encountered nostalgically recalled Radescu's desirability in the film<sup>262</sup>. It might be too much to call it sex-appeal, but there is certainly an erotic component in the Chinese audience's attraction to the young Romanian actor and his dreamy artist character in *Ciprian Porumbescu*. In an interview from 2015, Radescu himself remembers the time he met a group of Chinese tourists in the lift of a Romanian hotel. Apparently, they were so flustered about seeing "Ciprian Porumbescu" in the flesh that they forgot what button to press and almost broke down the lift<sup>263</sup>. The actor also alleges that, in 2007, both himself and director Sergiu Nicolaescu were approached for an interview by journalists from China Central Television, and immodestly suggests that his own exposure and sex-appeal were seen as comparable to those of a young Brad Pitt: "[Nicolaescu and I] were, for them, the ambassadors for Romanian film. If I was some sort of Brad Pitt of those times, Sergiu was a Clint Eastwood!"<sup>264</sup>.

Radescu attributes the success of *Ciprian Porumbescu* in China to the fact that it was the first film shown after the Cultural Revolution in which "the two leads, two lovers,

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<sup>262</sup> Serban, Alex Leo. "China cu Ciprian Porumbescu". <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/dileme-line/articol/china-ciprian-porumbescu>. February, 15, 2016.

<sup>263</sup> Parvu, Mihnea-Petru. "Brad Pitt de Romania. Actorul cu un miliard de fani in China comunista". <http://www.evz.ro/actorul-roman-cu-un-miliard-de-fani-in-china-comunista-serial-evz-avem-si-noi-un-brad-pitt-al-nostru.html>. December, 18, 2015.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

were not saying slogans, but were holding hands and kissing”<sup>265</sup>. This seems to be an overstatement, as Dr Ming Jian, Professor of Chinese Language and Culture at the William Paterson University, recalls another Romanian film whose very mild erotic content has had an even stronger impact on Chinese audiences<sup>266</sup>. Liviu Ciulei's *The Waves of the Danube / Valurile Dunarii* (Romania, 1959) was apparently only screened in China in 1972 (at the height of the Cultural Revolution), and it “pleasantly shocked the Chinese audiences, causing a kind of sexual awakening for many Chinese young people”<sup>267</sup>. According to Jian, one audience member that he interviewed refers to *The Waves of the Danube* as a “super sexual bombshell”, due to the “sexual outfit” and the kissing and cuddling of the two leads in the film. Ciulei's film was certainly not perceived as a sexually liberated film on its Romanian release, and is in fact extremely timid in its depiction of sexuality. However, the reaction of the Chinese only goes to show how the sexual politics of films are strongly connected to, and dependent of, the political and ideological context: China, at the time that *The Waves of the Danube* was screened there, was experiencing what Jian calls a “gender erasure”, i.e. the ideological erasure of the female gender, “which suppressed sexuality and erased women's identity and femininity”<sup>268</sup>. Irina Petrescu's sex-appeal in Ciulei's film is not obvious, but certain audiences may perceive her femininity as sexually appealing.

Before Vlad Radescu secured the role of Ciprian Porumbescu, his main contender for the part was Florin Piersic. If Radescu allegedly stole the hearts of the Chinese people,

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Jian does confirm though that the romantic scenes in *Ciprian Porumbescu* also left a “long lasting impression” on Chinese audiences. Jian, Personal Correspondence (E-mail), 29.04.2014.

<sup>267</sup> Jian, Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

Piersic became a national star and a true sex-symbol in Romania during the 1970s and 1980s. Piersic had a few supporting roles between 1957 (when he was 21 years old) and 1970, the year in which he was cast in the lead role in *The Haiduks of Captain Anghel / Haiducii lui Saptecai* (Dinu Cocea, Romania). Another film inspired by the success popular European epics of the '60s, *The Haiduks of Captain Anghel* uses Romanian settings and historical characters to tell the story of a fictional 18<sup>th</sup> century outlaw, who steals from the rich and helps the poor, while entertaining romantic liaisons with a series of attractive women in the process. The film is a sequel of 1966's *The Haiduks / Haiducii*, which does not actually feature Piersic in a leading role. However, his character has enough sex-appeal (athletic build, blond locks, firm jaw, a gaze full of mystery, determination and desire, a swaying walk in tight white trousers) for him to remain the lead in the subsequent films of the series. The image of masculinity that Piersic embodied transformed during the 1980s (as will be discussed later), but he remained the ultimate object of desire, a quality to which his personal life also contributed. He was married a few times, and had affairs with some of the most beautiful Romanian actresses and singers, particularly pop starlet Angela Similea (there are also rumours that the two starred in a raunchy amateur film in the 1980s, though there is no proof of this). Despite his film career pretty much coming to an end after 1990, the nostalgicised sex-appeal of Piersic persists. In 2011, in a survey conducted by political satire magazine *Academia Catavencu*, the actor tops the list of the greatest Romanian lovers of all time. Florin Piersic's popularity demonstrates that the socialist state's attempts to screen sexuality out of films was not particularly effective, and that the mechanisms of sexuality, desire and arousal worked in much more complex ways than the party assumed they would, i.e. off-screen as much as on-screen.

## **VI.6. Between Knowing and Telling: *Picture Postcards with Wild***

### ***Flowers***

In 1975, the anti-abortion decree was already in place for eight years. The number of infant and mother deaths was a well-kept secret. In this context, 40-year old writer-director Andrei Blaier makes *Picture Postcards with Wild Flowers / Illustrate cu flori de camp*, which tells the story of Laura (Carmen Galin), a young woman who becomes pregnant by an older married man, and who tries to get an abortion with the help of an older woman named Didina (Draga Olteanu-Matei). Arriving at Didina's house, Laura finds Didina and her accomplice (Eliza Petrachescu) in the middle of wedding preparations. After the abortion is performed and the older women go to the wedding party, Laura is kept company by Irina (Elena Albu), the accomplice's daughter. The unsanitary conditions and rudimentary techniques by which the abortion is performed lead to Laura's death. The film explores the aftermath of this tragedy, whereby Irina is coerced into remaining silent by her mother and Didina. Ultimately, unable to cope with the guilt and the inability to tell the truth, Irina takes her own life.

Superficially, the film is entirely in accord with the dominant socialist ideology. It appears to condemn both illicit romantic affairs, by “punishing” Laura with the unwanted pregnancy, and the practice of abortion, by imposing a tragic ending on her, as well as on those around her (e.g. Irina). It is extremely likely that only thus, by appearing to conform to the legal and moral standards advocated and implemented by Romanian state socialism, was the making of this film possible. Blaier treads very carefully whenever the very sensitive issues crop up. For example, in an early

conversation between Irina and Laura, the words “child” and “pregnancy” are removed from the dialogue and replaced by pauses, betraying a hesitation in the filmmaker’s approach to tackle the abortion issue head-on. Talking about the father of the baby, Laura tells Irina: “In order for me to keep him, I must give up my...”. She leaves her sentence unfinished, though both herself, and Irina clearly know that she means the baby. This is representative of something discussed previously in this study, which is the syndrome of systematic mystification of truth throughout the Romanian society under state socialism. The essence of things was only ever hinted at, as it contravened the “official” version of facts. However, everyone knew what the truth was. This functions almost as a telepathic method of communication, and its purpose is to mask and therefore prohibit real communication from happening.

However, *Picture Postcards with Wild Flowers* is slightly more complex than it would initially appear. The communication between Laura and Irina truly opens up as the plot progresses, and the film becomes an exploration of both sexual politics and of the effects that the culture of secrecy has on individual lives, rather than just a study of the effects of illegal abortions (which is likely how it was sold to the censors for it to earn their stamp of approval). One third through the film, the girls have a conversation about Laura's first sexual experience with Titel, the man who got her pregnant, and the only man she has ever slept with. The characters are allowing themselves to talk frankly (albeit in a rather lyricised fashion) about something that was not actually talked about in society, or that was mainly limited to the physiologically-focussed sex education books. Furthermore, the conversation reveals that Laura's first sexual encounter was rather unusual, and it could even be read in a queer fashion (if by queer we mean non-

heteronormative). Laura remembers how one time Titel wanted to put make-up on her himself. This suggests that, if not necessarily finding it enjoyable, the man is at least curious about trying this, a hint at an idea of masculinity that was not aligned to the dominant social (including the socialist ideological) view. On the other hand, Laura adds, Titel made her look deliberately old. This also goes against traditional notions of romance and attraction, by which make-up, more often than not, is meant to enhance youth over maturity, but it can also be read as an indication of the man's guilt for sleeping with a woman much younger than him.

There is also a different type of opposition between the older and the younger generation, when it comes to Didina, Irina and her mother dealing with Laura's death. While the older women are plotting on hiding the death and avoiding responsibility for what was essentially their crime, Irina is more determined to have it all out in the open, and to fully deal with the consequences of the act. When Didina and Irina's mother talk about who else might know what happened, Didina says: "Irina knows. If only she hadn't told anyone else... You know what the youth are like nowadays". This is, I argue, the idea that lifts the film's function above that of simply reinforcing the official anti-abortion discourse. It suggests that the younger generation was much more prone to *talking* – to talking things through, to having things out in the open, to demystify the mystified, or in other words, to make visible things which the socialist ideology strove to keep hidden: the shame of having an affair with a married man, the shame of disposing with one's body whichever way one liked.

In the end, the overbearing influence of her mother and of Didina keep Irina an



accomplice to the crime – the “crime” of abortion, but also that of silence. While obeying Didina's military-like order - “Let's keep our mouths shut, girls!” – Irina accuses her mother of having “smeared” her, of having destroyed her life. Her accusation is a small, but significantly redemptive act. In direct contrast to Titel's final gesture, who nonchalantly discards Laura's watch out in a field (thus delimiting himself from her existence), Irina's suicide note, written on a picture postcard with wild flowers, symbolically validates Laura's loss of life, but also Laura's life, with all her “punishable” feelings and actions included.

## **VI.7. Michael the Brave Can Love, but He Has Better Things to Do**

While not particularly popular with critics, *Michael the Brave / Mihai Viteazul* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, Romania / France / Italy, 1970) – also known as *The Last Crusade* at the time of its international release – is, to this day, one of the most popular Romanian films of all time. It had one of the highest production values for a Romanian film, and the production itself is the stuff of legend now. For example, it is widely known that the national army was made available for Nicolaescu's epic battle scenes. For years, Nicolaescu would also insist that his film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, which is entirely inaccurate: it was merely Romania's submission that year. He also complained that some of his “pioneering” filming techniques were “stolen” by the Wachowskis in *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, USA, 1999).

*Michael the Brave* is a romanticised account of the Wallachian ruler with the same name, who became the first to unite Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania into a single

country, Romania, in 1601, after fighting the Hungarians and the Ottomans. The film is a historical epic which is meant, on the one hand, to “entertain”, in an attempt to make Romanian films more commercially viable (see Chapter V), but also, on the other, to cinematically illustrate a heroic page in the grand, national history book, a programmatic trend characteristic to Romanian cinema during state socialism. Shot in widescreen, with a rich colour palette, and carefully chosen sets and costumes, the film does look spectacular, even though the filmmaking decisions are almost always meant to illustrate the supremacy of the Romanian ruler over his political enemies, and the quality of Romanians as a “chosen” Christian people among lands occupied by sinful pagans.

Throughout the film, Prince Mihai / Michael (Amza Pellea) is depicted as a stern, determined, and disciplined man, extremely focussed on his goal to liberate the “Romanian Princedoms” from the influence of the Ottomans and the Hungarians, and to unite the three regions into a single state, richer and more powerful. He has an extremely close bond with Selim Pasa (who is played by Sergiu Nicolaescu himself), an Ottoman officer that he grew up with, and the fact that they are on opposing sides does not seem to affect their friendship. At times, this relationship seems stronger than any other emotional bonds Mihai might have, including the one he has with his son Mihaita, or with his wife, Stanca (Ioana Bulca). Mihai orders his son around, and he admires his own wife, but he only exchanges affectionate “I love you”s with Selim. The relationship with his wife is cold and distant and, indeed, it resembles more a professional partnership than a long-term institutionalisation of their feelings for each other. When they reunite after a long time apart, and only after she asks him whether he

will speak to her, he tells her that he missed her. Very formally, she thanks him, and she thanks him “precisely because [she] know[s] it's not true”. While this is clearly not meant to be an ideal relationship, or one in which the audience is supposed to be significantly invested, within the context of the film it is constructed as a perfectly acceptable one. Indeed, it conforms to the dominant ideological line, which favours mutual respect as the basis for a successful marriage, rather than love or even physical attraction.

It is very interesting to note the character construction of Nicolae, Mihai's son, who can be read as a queer character. He does not represent the same idea of masculinity as his father and, in fact, he seems to fit the unfortunate trope of the sad young gay man, with an absent father and a domineering mother. Even the raging confession he makes to his father, toward the end of the film, that he values his mother more than him, may be read as a “coming out” act on his part. Similarly, Mihai's main political rival, Sigismund de Bathory (Ion Besoiu) is depicted as being feminine and slightly camp, not just in the way that he declares his love for princess Maria Christina (who thinks of him as “cute, but a child”), but also in his interactions with other men. When Mihai visits him in his tent, Sigismund wears a wavy shirt and fondles an erect sword handle, provocatively telling Mihai: “It is nice here, it smells of horses, of strong men. I can feel we're going to become friends”. In effect, antagonists are feminised in order to make them appear weak, corruptible, and certainly less admirable than the protagonist – this is not an uncommon filmic technique, as Bond films, for example, abound with it. In the ideological context of this specific film though, it is aimed at enhancing the masculinity of the heroic figure of the true Romanian man, who would be perceived as strong and

powerful.

Quite early in the film, Mihai meets the countess Rosana Viventini (Irina Gardescu), his supposed love interest throughout the epic. Her model of femininity is different to Stanca's, but not significantly. She is younger and more conventionally attractive, her garments are slightly more revealing, and she is less discontented with life. Other than that, at least as far as Mihai is concerned, she is little more than a younger version of Stanca. While Mihai is attracted by her, he does not fall for her with the same intensity that she falls for him. After the two first meet, when asked by Selim whether the princess is beautiful, Mihai asks his friend "Why?", rather than give a straightforward answer. It is the reaction of a man supposedly unmoved by "trivialities" such as being attracted to a woman. His focus is a political one, and that takes over everything else. This is quite obviously adhering to the work ethic promoted by state socialism, who demands that its citizens dedicate themselves fully to the cause of building the luminous "multilaterally developed socialist society", of which the union of the three Princesdoms is an evident approximation.

His goal and his determination are, however, what Rosana uses to get close to Mihai. When confessing to Mihai why she has persuaded her brother to lend Mihai the money he has asked for, she suggests she was influenced by his determination and pride. "I was troubled by the fact you don't know how to humiliate yourself", she adds. Furthermore, she invites herself over to Transylvania, in Alba Iulia, where her friend Maria Christina de Habsburg is engaged to marry Sigismund Bathory, the Prince of Transylvania. She hopes to meet Mihai there, but is hesitant to make him aware of this, as she tells him she

“would very much like to know [his] country”. Again, this is a reflection of the preoccupation that state socialism has in regards to the glorification of Romania's past, as well as the propagandistic narrative surrounding the country's unique riches, often suggesting, as Nicolaescu does here, that a man is indivisible from his country. Through the medium of film, the socialist ideology advocates for the concealment of woman's erotic desire, and its transfer onto her the man's community, or motherland.

Both Rosana and Mihai are denied erotic accomplishment – in fact, it is Mihai that denies this to Rosana. When they see each other again, and she longingly wonders whether they would see each other again, he asks Rosana to wait for him in Transylvania, while he goes about his geopolitical affairs. Months later, they accidentally meet at a formal event, and they are very formal to each other. “How are you, Rosana?” he asks. She replies: “I thank your excellency for remembering me”, something which Mihai does not bother to address. When, later still, they meet in a more intimate setting, i.e. Rosana's quarters, she once more comes onto him, only for him to reject her again. Framed in medium shot, in front of her empty bed in the background, she suggests that he takes some time to rest, and she opens her arms to him asking that he lets her stay close by. Mihai remains stern and unaffected, questioning why she does this. She finally confesses she loves him, then throws herself to his chest, she lifts up her head and smiles stoically. Despite all the promises made months earlier, Mihai leaves Rosana's feelings unrequited. The direction even denies the two a kiss, something which less ideologically-driven filmmaking would have naturally led to by this point in the film. Rosana is also excluded socially as Mihai's potential object of erotic fulfilment: when he is crowned Prince of the Romanian Countries, she stands in

the shadows of the galleries of the palace, while his wife stands near to him, and Selim even nearer.

Repurposing the question Rosana asked of him earlier – “When will we ever see each other again?” – Mihai asks this of Selim, knowing he would leave for a very long time. As in the Romanian society of the 1970s, here too comradeship is supposed to trump romantic values. Going back to where this thesis started, and recounting Ceausescu’s claim, that Mihai’s love should be depicted “only if it played a dominant role in his activity”, and that “if it's just something incidental, we should treat it incidentally”, it looks like Nicolaescu follows this prescription closely. But what does Ceausescu mean by opposing the dominant to the incidental? When talking about the pairings “secrecy / disclosure” and “private / public”, Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that they are “sites for the contestation of meaning”<sup>269</sup>. Both Ceausescu seems to be doing this exact thing, i.e. contesting the meaning of representing sexuality, by imposing the artificial pairing “dominant / incidental” on representation. Because when is a character’s sexuality dominant? And if it’s not dominant, Ceausescu suggests, then it can only be incidental, i.e. minor, i.e. dispensable.

On the other hand, is this censorship, or is it self-censorship? According to Marcuse, repression being “‘spontaneously’ reproduced” by the (repressed) individuals (filmmakers, in this case), “allows a relaxation of external, compulsory repression”<sup>270</sup>, so one is inclined to go for the latter. Nicolaescu avoids the “compulsory repression” – i.e. censorship – by deciding to dismiss sexuality. Through his choices, the filmmaker

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<sup>269</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology...*, 72.

<sup>270</sup> Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, 220.

agrees with the definition suggested to him, where “incidental” is something ultimately not worth dwelling upon. In Carol Siegel’s words, “male heroes cannot be sexually free and still heroic”<sup>271</sup>. Nicolaescu makes the character himself dismiss any romantic preoccupations, thus writing history through film, which is the ultimate triumph of ideological conquest.

## **VI.8. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the ways in which representations of sex and sexuality in Romanian film culture of the 1970s were further suppressed by socialist state propaganda, and how subversion became almost impossible when the visibility of sex and sexuality in Romanian films was concerned. I have first looked at the wider socio-political context to illustrate the factors that facilitated the tighter ideological control, and demonstrated how this was programmatically aligned to the principles of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu had strived to implement from the beginning of the decade.

I have also argued that the minimal sex education was aimed at reinforcing the physiological aspects of sexuality, and that sexual behaviour was discouraged through a variety of channels, including in reference to films. I examined the various trends surrounding sexual representations in the wider cinematic context, and illustrated how, in the absence of explicitly sexual content on Romanian screens, film genres in which sexuality was sublimated became increasingly popular with Romanian audiences. At the same time, I showed how the desirability of male film stars was inadvertently facilitated

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<sup>271</sup> Siegel, *Radical Sex Cinema*, 11.

by the socialist propagandistic historical films, and looked at the ways in which the lyrical qualities of Romanian film characters translated transnationally into objects of desire (for Chinese audiences, for example).

Finally, I have examined the ways in which ideas of femininity and masculinity are constructed in two very different films of the period. I have shown how *Picture Postcards with Wildflowers*, while superficially reinforcing the dominant socialist policy of prohibiting abortions, can also be read as a critique of the state's silencing of sexuality. I have also attempted to answer the question in the title of this study, by analysing the ways in which the construction of masculinity in *Michael the Brave* not just trivialises sexuality, but contests its meaning, redefining it within the artificial and unreliable parameters of "dominant" vs "incidental".



## **Chapter VII: The 1980s, or Love in the Dark**

In the 1980s, Nicolae Ceausescu's rule strengthened to the point of becoming a full-blown totalitarian dictatorship, while economically, socially and culturally, Romania continued to decline. With access to basic means for subsistence increasingly limited, Romanians had to find alternative ways to survive, in what became, in many aspects, a dark, cold and unfamiliar country. Poverty, censorship, surveillance and violent repression intensified throughout the decade, which in turn led to anti-establishment protests, however infrequent, to gain more and more impact. In this chapter, I look at how these two strands influenced the development of cinema, in terms of production, but also in terms of distribution and reception. What I hope will emerge from this chapter is the fact that intimacy and eroticism, as expressed, consumed and processed through cinema, are finally (but subversively) coming to serve one of their primary functions, that of providing some escape from desperate living.

### **VII.1 Uses and Abuses of the Social Body: Economy and Society in Ceausescu's Last Decade**

According to historian Denis Deletant, the main reason behind Romanians' disillusionment with Ceausescu's rule had to do with the failure of the economy, and the dramatic and sustained reduction of the means to survive. While by the mid-1980s Mikhail Gorbachev was beginning to put the USSR on track for economic and political reforms, by implementing his "perestroika" policy which essentially ended central planning, Romania's communist leader turned even more toward Stalinism, and toward a politics of isolation, nationalism, and implicit cultural autarchy. Due to a series of

developments that made Romania rely heavily on imports in many sectors, its external financial debt increased considerably by the end of the '70s. Ceausescu's ambitions for Romania to “stand alone” on the world stage inevitably affected his attitude toward the economy, and at the beginning of the '80s he proclaimed that by the end of the decade the country's external debt would be completely repaid.

However, this ambition was conducive of measures that would have deep repercussions on the welfare of Romanian citizens. Historian Denis Deletant considers this series of austerity measures to be “unparalleled even in the bleak history of East European Communist regimes”<sup>272</sup>. In July 1982, Iulian Mincu, the Minister for Public Health, elaborated the Rational Alimentation Programme, through which the Communist government imposed calorie- and protein-based food consumption limits. Essentially, the rationing of bread, flour, sugar, eggs, milk, and dairy was introduced later in the year in some provincial towns, and then extended to most of the country by the following year. Food would remain subject to rationing throughout the 1980s, and by the end of the decade it became increasingly difficult for families to secure basic food products. Energy shortages and power cuts became more and more frequent, as did home temperature regulations (gas provision was centralised), while hot water provision was limited to usually just one day a week.

It could perhaps be quite difficult to imagine how, given the challenging economic situation, Romanians could still find any energy to invest in romantic and sexual pursuits. While this is not very easy at all to pin down, the reality may actually be quite

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<sup>272</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*, 126.

different (and Romanian films from the era may attest to this, as shall be evident later on). On the one hand, as access to contraception had already been severely limited since the 1960s, Ceausescu's pro-natalist policy can give an idea regarding the frequency of sexual encounters between heterosexual Romanians, if one looks at the evolution of the number of births. In decline throughout the 1970s, and reaching the lowest point since the '67 Decree in 1982-83, the birth rate saw a resurgence in the last five years of the decade. On the other hand, the number of abortions, in their vast majority illegal, peaked in 1982, when it was more than 25% higher than in 1975. Concerned by this trend, authorities started a process of revision and strengthening of the anti-abortion legislation in the spring of 1983, which yielded real legal changes two years later. Thus, the age limit for medically permitted abortions increased from 40 to 45 years, while mothers now had to have at least five children rather than four, in order for an abortion to be permitted. The number of abortions then started to drop again, though not as significantly as the authorities perhaps expected.

It is plausible that these extra measures led to a decrease in the frequency of sexual relations. On the other hand, more and more Romanians, particularly those close to the Western borders, gained access to illicit foreign contraceptives<sup>273</sup>. The attitudes toward sex would therefore change somewhat. Unless for procreation, sex remained virtually punished by law, and forced into secrecy, as in the previous decade. However, the secrecy itself became richer and more enjoyable, without the fear of having to face prison or back alley abortions. On the other hand though, many of those who did not have access to contraception and wanted to avoid a pregnancy often resorted to

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<sup>273</sup> Miroiu, *Eradicarea instinctului placerii*.

practicing *coitus interruptus*<sup>274</sup>. Long-term, this could presumably take much of the pleasure out of the sexual act. While this assertion may be speculative to an extent, the relationship between the state and the individual's right to pleasure becomes apparent in the way individuals have had to resort to ways of modifying their sexual behaviour, which eventually led to mutations in their attitude toward sex more generally.

The supplementary restrictive measures of 1985 had devastating effects on society at large. By the following year, infant deaths grew from 22% to 30%, while more and more babies were born either prematurely or with dystrophia and other congenital diseases. The number of incomplete abortions soared, which led to a sharp increase in the number of maternal deaths by abortion and direct obstetrical risk<sup>275</sup>. Child abandonment surged. Orphanages and children's hospitals were overpopulated by the end of the decade. Combined with extreme underfinancing and poor management, this became a social problem that would make the headlines of the Western press in the years immediately following the 1989 anti-communist revolution, but which would receive insufficient attention within the country.

Even apart from this, the female body became almost a public site, as far as the socialist state was concerned. While displaying an overtly strait-laced attitude when it came to matters of sexuality and nudity, the state acted in a somewhat different manner behind closed doors. One of the most controversial practices of the 1980s was the so-called “regular and compulsory gynaecologic testing of the whole fertile feminine body”

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<sup>274</sup> The most popular “contraceptive” method other than abortion, according to Soare, Florin. “Institutii”. In *Politica pronatalista a regimului Ceausescu. Vol. II: Institutii si practici*, edited by Luciana Jinga and Florin Soare. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2011, 153.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

(where “body” designates the economic body, i.e. all officially employed women). The stated purpose of these tests was to identify potential gynaecologic illnesses and to protect the health of women. In reality, the true outcome was the assessment of pregnancy, so that if the woman was pregnant she could be officially registered and continuously monitored<sup>276</sup>. The tests took place in factories and generally any institutions with predominantly female staff, including schools. They involved the presence of a gynaecologist, as well as that of a representative of the Ministry for Internal Affairs. The tests were normally announced one day before, so women sometimes found ways to postpone taking part, “not necessarily because they were trying to hide a pregnancy, but particularly because of the repulsion provoked by the act itself”<sup>277</sup>. As the state organs technically entered the bodies of their female citizens, with no real consent on their behalf (the women were bound by law to be subjected to these tests, which left no room for consent), this whole practice can be construed as collective rape. This undoubtedly led to traumatic mutations in Romanian women's emotional and interpersonal development, and implicitly in terms of their attitudes toward sex and intimacy. This subject is something yet to be thoroughly researched.

## **VII.2. Romanian Cinema, Above Ground, Looking Down**

The 1980s were the decade in which Ceausescu's so-called “cult of personality” achieved unimaginable heights, and it overwhelmingly involved the praises sung to him by some of the most important public figures, from all domains of public life. Even as the decade began, it was already common practice for all media outlets to focus mainly

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<sup>276</sup> Soare, *Instituti*, 128.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

on the achievements and the illustrious personality of the country leader (this trend had been gradually becoming the norm ever since the July Theses), at the expense of reporting factuality. Of course, some of these articles and interventions, riddled with praise, were written by actual journalists, and in fact no news reports or documentaries were even possible without including positive references to Ceausescu and the Communist Party. However, in order to increase the legitimacy and the impact of the message even more, public personalities, from the academia, the arts and science, sport and so on, were regularly asked (or even volunteered) to contribute such pieces.

Film-related outlets were not an exception to this. The *Cinema* magazine, still the only specialised film publication, and still under the control of the socialist state, was now opening each and every monthly issue with at least three pages of usually non-topical perorations regarding the guiding and illuminating contributions Ceausescu was making to the film industry. Among the ones singing the communist leader's praises were directors Geo Saizescu, Virgil Calotescu, Gheorghe Vitanidis, as well as actors George Motoi and Ion Dichiseanu, who in a 1980 issue of *Cinema* commended the development of Romanian cinema under Ceausescu.

Foreign film imports did not stop in the 1980s, but they became increasingly limited to countries from the Eastern Bloc. On television, foreign films were mostly limited to the so-called “tele-cinematheque”. When they happen to be Western productions, they date, for the most part, from earlier decades, e.g. *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, USA, 1939), which was broadcast as a miniseries. This is further proof of the refusal of the socialist state apparatus to engage with the present state of things. From the point of

view of representations of sexuality and of their visibility, this tendency exposed audiences to mostly tame melodramas from the mid-century.

Western television, when seen by Romanian audiences in the era of a single TV channel, was extremely popular though. Nothing would become as popular as the prime-time soap *Dallas* (1978-1991), the last American TV series broadcast in socialist Romania. Allegedly, Nicolae Ceausescu himself approved the broadcast of the saga of the rich Ewing family, as he saw it as a means to support anti-Western propaganda, since it illustrated the decadence and the excesses of the West (although scenes with sexual content were carefully edited out of the broadcast version). In fact, *Dallas* had the opposite effect on the pauperised Romanian citizens, as they dreamt of attaining the luxury and the glamour of the series. On the other hand, while the character of J.R. Ewing had become synonymous with a villain across the globe, the characters of Pamela and Bobby Ewing, representatives of the “good” as opposed to J.R.’s “evil”, were the idealised image of the romantic couple for Romanian audiences.

Toward the end of the decade though, the Romanian Television slowly gave up importing TV series, or even securing broadcasting rights for Western films. This was mainly because of a lack of funds, but also because of the increasing paranoia of the main censorship institutions. In accordance to Gorbachev’s policies of reform and openness, Soviet productions also started to have a less rigid ideological approach. Ion Bucheru, former editor at the Romanian National Television, explains that this had an effect on film imports from the USSR. He gives the example of the Latvian film *Forgive Me / Prosti* (Ernest Yasan, USSR, 1986), which was considered for

distribution, but was never shown on Romanian screens before 1989:

In the movie, 15 workers rape a woman who was going back home to get engaged. She then doesn't dare to get engaged any more. The film was not made using any violent imagery, but there was no doubt as to what had happened [to the woman]. And the men were not shabby or homeless or urchins, they were workers! And everything was taking place in socialist Moscow of 1981-1983. How could you possibly show such a film about the working class on television? Because this system was functioning in a terrible manner: take a man, or a case, extrapolate, and say that this man was the system, so you can't attack the system.<sup>278</sup>

In addition to this, Bucheru recalls, East German films, a possible alternative to Soviet ones, had too much sex, and were therefore “unacceptable for Romania”<sup>279</sup>. Eventually, Romanian films became the only solution to fill two of the daily four hours of television broadcast, and to ensure they wouldn't go against the dominant patriotic ideology. Bucheru says that gradually even the Romanian film fund became extremely limited, so that reruns became absolutely necessary. Only completely “harmless” films were preferred by the editors of the Romanian television, in order to avoid any repercussions. One of the “absolute champions” of reruns was the film *The Town Seen from Above / Orasul vazut de sus* (Lucian Bratu, 1970), the story of a determined and morally incorruptible woman played by Margareta Pogonat, who becomes the mayor of an

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<sup>278</sup> “Filmul *Orasul, vazut de sus* a fost campion absolut la difuzari: de 7 ori in 3 ani”.  
<http://jurnalul.ro/scinteia/special/filmul-orasul-vazut-de-sus-a-fost-campion-absolut-la-difuzari-de-7-ori-in-3-ani-525657.html>. April, 3, 2016.

<sup>279</sup> Idem.



industrial town in order to restore order, as factory workers had got into bad habits (such as laziness and drinking). According to the former TV editor Bucheru, the film ended up being broadcast seven times in just three years.

One final note Bucheru makes is the fact that those above him on the programming hierarchy, responsible for censoring the “unpleasant” scenes from mostly acceptable films, were almost obsessed with cutting out all sex scenes. What they understood by sex scene is revealing for the generalised attitudes that, at least officially, one was supposed to have toward sex and its public representation. As Bucheru explains, “What was a sex scene back then? Any dress finishing a few inches above the knee. Any beginning of a love scene”<sup>280</sup>. The censorship thus extended to the smallest details, such as a few inches of naked skin, or a couple kissing, again reminiscing of the Hays Code, which had become obsolete in America 20 years before.

In this context, some spectators developed a degree of nostalgia for more obviously erotic films from decades before. A Bucharest reader wrote to the *Cinema* magazine in 1980, to say that he would gladly give up the Spanish film *La vida sigue igual* (this is most likely a 1969 Julio Iglesias vehicle, directed by Eugenio Martin), as well as all Indian and Turkish melodramas, if he could instead see, at least once more, *One Summer of Happiness / Sommardansen* (Arne Mattson, Sweden, 1951)<sup>281</sup>, a film which caused minor controversies when initially released, due to a couple of nude scenes. This shows how the romances from those Indian and Turkish films, stripped of all sexual content, still left gaps in terms of fulfilling the film viewers' erotic fantasies, despite

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<sup>280</sup> Idem.

<sup>281</sup> *Cinema*, no. 1 (1980), 23.

their overwhelming popularity.

### **VII.3. Fantasies are Fulfilled Underground: The Impact of Illicit Film Distribution**

Perhaps one of the most important developments in the Romanian film culture of the 1980s had to do with technology, and is something which Raluca-Nicoleta Radu argues “has influenced the censorship’s zones of control as far as consumption was concerned”<sup>282</sup>. Against the backdrop of a “chronical lack of satisfactory TV or radio programmes”, an illicit system of import, reproduction and distribution of foreign films developed in the '80s, a phenomenon that is the focus of the documentary *Chuck Norris vs Communism* (Ilinca Calugareanu, UK / Romania / Germany, 2015). Essentially, in this system, Romanians could gain access to VHS players and cassettes either on the black market, or from any relatives that may have emigrated to Western Europe. A man called Teodor Zamfir became a veritable businessman simply by making copies of the video-cassettes originally released, and selling these copies illegally to anyone that had access to VHS players and could afford to pay for this home entertainment. Irina Margareta Nistor, an editor with the National Television, was co-opted to dub any English-speaking films, and the distinct rasp in her slightly nasal voice gained her a widespread popularity, even though few were able to associate the voice with a name or a face until after the fall of the regime. All of this happened out of the state's sight, as did the audience's consumption of these films, although there are suggestions by some of the interviewees in Calugareanu's film that representatives of the state were often aware of, and often complicit to, this practice, which makes the degree of its success

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<sup>282</sup> Radu, *Institutii culturale in tranzitie*, 80.

much more plausible, in fact.

In contemporary accounts of Romanians that grew up during the '80s, a certain pattern of exhibition and consumption emerges. A VHS owner would organise “video nights”, at which close family and friends, and even neighbours, were invited to attend for free, while strangers could also participate in exchange for a fee. This created secret communities and informal networks of video consumers, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that most Romanians in towns and cities knew at least one person who owned a VHS player and went to at least one such “video night” at some point during the decade. The marathon screening itself also seems to follow a pattern. The video night started with one or two action films, which children were also allowed to watch, while the films watched toward the early morning tended to be in the horror or comedy genre. However, as the night peaked and children were sent to bed, adults would settle in for more adult-appropriate content, i.e. either soft-core or hard-core pornographic films. For example, one of the women interviewed in *Chuck Norris vs Communism* recalls how the very first film she got to see on video was Bertolucci's erotically charged – and problematic – *Last Tango in Paris*.

In fact, pornographic films were more popular than one would imagine. In his introduction to the volume *Primul meu porno / My First Porno*, cultural critic Marius Chivu explains how the consumption of pornography was possible in Romania during the communist years due to a series of factors, such as “bootleggers, video players and [overly] copied tapes, clandestine screenings in ‘culture houses’ or in living rooms, Serbian TV channels, erotic magazines, posters or playing cards bought from small

markets in border towns. Back then, pornography meant both 2 May nudists<sup>283</sup> and rock videos; both Playboy and Kamasutra; both the satellite dish and the Yugoslav television; both the tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (in its eroticised cartoon version) and Bertolucci's Last Tango in Paris or Pasolini's Decameron<sup>284</sup>.

Radio presenter Bogdan Serban recalls how he “almost” saw his first pornographic film, on a videotape his father had, around 1986. His father was working as an engineer in Libya, which was how the family got a VHS player in the first place. Serban describes the new device as “a new Messiah”, and compares watching something on video to having Christmas at least every day, if not a few times a day. “We didn't have to wait a whole week for the Cartoon Gala [a TV programme] anymore, which was only a few minutes long anyway, now we had three-hour-long tapes, full of cartoons (The Pink Panther, Woody Woodpecker, Tom and Jerry etc.).”<sup>285</sup> Serban remembers how he and his brother found a tape labelled Porno Cartoons among his father's clothes. Both himself, and his brother had heard the word “porno” before, “whispered by our parents or, among fits of laughter when we were there, by guests”<sup>286</sup>. “The more prohibited it seemed, the more our desire to elucidate the secret of the tape grew”<sup>287</sup>, Serban recalls. However, when him and his brother were finally by themselves and were able to see the tape, a power cut denied them this opportunity, a literal example of how the socialist state and the dreary state of the economy got in the way of cinematic sex finding its audience.

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<sup>283</sup> 2 May was the name of a nudist beach on the Black Sea.

<sup>284</sup> Chivu, Marius ed. *Primul meu porno*. Bucharest: Editura Art, 2011, 11.

<sup>285</sup> Serban, Bogdan. “A fost sau n-a fost porno?”. *Primul meu porno*, edited by Marius Chivu. Bucharest: Editura Art, 2011, 236.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

Political theorist Adrian Cioroianu remembers how the pornographic films shown during the video nights were mainly German, or were at least dubbed in German. Looking back, he also considers these porno films to have been the most disadvantaged, mostly because the viewer numbers tended to drop over the course of the film marathon: women moved to the kitchen to make coffee, or to simply chat, some of the men went out on the balcony to smoke, while those that stayed “invariably” fast-forwarded through the film, perhaps pausing every now and then for those scenes that the owner of the VHS “would recommend as being a must”<sup>288</sup>. Because of this, Cioroianu does not remember having been able to see an erotic film from start to finish during these marathons, nor does he remember any film titles. While this may be the case with bigger groups rather than more intimate ones, it was possible for erotic films to be enjoyed, though perhaps not in the way they were intended. Marius Chivu recalls bits of dialogue between his parents and another couple, which he and his friend overheard from outside the living room, where the adults were watching a porn film. What stands out in Chivu’s recollection is the adults’ playful and rather ironic attitude toward what they were watching: men mocked their own penis size compared to the actors’, women were in awe of seeing black penises for the first time ever, and everyone imagined themselves to be in the actors’ place.

Another memorable thing from these video nights, and something another interviewee mentions in Calugareanu's film, was Irina Nistor's dubbing style, and her avoidance of translating sexually charged words, not only when they were meant to express sexual

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<sup>288</sup> Cioroianu, Adrian. “Erotikon 1985 (Comunism, TV si video – de la Craiova la Paris, via Belgrad)”. In *Primul meu porno*, edited by Marius Chivu. Bucharest: Editura Art, 2011, 53.

desire, but also when used for swearing. Nistor thus inadvertently acted as a pre-watershed screener before the pre-watershed era: a “fuck you” in the original language became, in the Romanian translation, “go to hell”. To the hilarity of these unseen underground audiences, Nistor's perceived sense of decency made her transpose the violence of swearing into erotically charged exchanges. Marius Chivu recalls the way that Nistor translated a piece of dialogue between Sylvester Stallone and Dolly Parton when dubbing *Rhinestone* (Bob Clark, USA, 1984). When Stallone tells Parton “Your top is so wide open, I can see your nipples”, Nistor translated this as “Your cleavage is so deep that I can see your breasts”. Even more interesting was Parton's retort and Nistor's avoidance not just of the translation of the word “dick”, but of any suggestion linked to the male sexual organ. She translated Parton’s line “And your trousers so tight, that I can see your dick” as “And your trousers so tight that I can see your pulse!”<sup>289</sup>. This use of language became a staple of Nistor's, and so legendary in Romania that in more recent years the band Taxi have released a song called *Subtitrarea la romani / Subtitling in Romania*, the chorus of which makes a mockery of Nistor's trademark. While the male lead sings “Hey, motherfucker, don't fuck with me, go fuck yourself and leave me be”, two female backing vocalists “translate” that as “You're a wretched man and you upset me, and I want you to leave right away”. Surprisingly, but also symptomatically, Nistor's strategies to translate perceivedly offensive phrases became the norm in the subtitling of films post-1989. To this day, regardless of the film's suitability rating, the strong language of the original is considerably softened in the Romanian translation.

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<sup>289</sup> Chivu, *Primul meu porno*, 43-44.

When talking comparatively about TV entertainment in Socialist Eastern Europe, Sabina Mihelj explains how “Yugoslavia's peculiar geopolitical position and relative independence from the Soviet bloc made its media system particularly open to Western programs”<sup>290</sup>. Romanians in the Western part of the country took full advantage of this in the 1980s. While citizens of Bucharest and its neighbouring Southern counties were able to access Bulgarian television, which offered slightly more varied programmes than the Romanian one, inhabitants of Western counties such as Arad, Timis, Caras-Severin, and Dolj delighted in the richness of programmes offered by Yugoslavian TV. Historian Cioroianu recalls how he first saw *Last Tango in Paris*, in the spring of 1985, when he was 18-years old. He watched it with his parents, during a so-called “vikend maraton” on TV Beograd (Belgrade TV): from Friday evening until Sunday evening, several films from the West were shown, including *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Too Afraid to Ask)* (Woody Allen, USA, 1972), and of course *Last Tango...*, the backstory of which, curiously, Cioroianu and his classmates were familiar with. He remembers that they were already aware of the Italian Catholic Church’s disapproval of Bertolucci’s film, and also of British audiences crossing the Channel in order to watch it in French cinemas – though it is not clear how they got to know these things.

Needless to say, both Allen's and Bertolucci's films were impossible to be seen on the Romanian television in the 1980s. However, the ideologically-driven penury of representations of sex and sexuality in films and TV, as shown in this subsection, only

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<sup>290</sup> Mihelj, Sabina. “Television Entertainment in Socialist Eastern Europe”. In *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, edited by Aniko Imre, Timothy Havens and Katalin Lustyik. New York and London: Routledge, 2012, 16.

went to stimulate audiences to find creative ways of sourcing such representations, mirroring the effects that the official prohibition of abortion had not on eliminating abortions altogether, but on finding alternative methods and spaces to perform them.

#### **VII.4. Committees in Pink – The High-School Trilogy**

In the second half of the 1980s, three films were released, which would become some of the most successful Romanian films of all time. Written by George Sovu and directed by Nicolae Corjos, and made at the same time that Hollywood saw a surge in popularity for the teen film genre (but unlikely to be influenced by this), *Confessions of Love / Declaratie de dragoste* (1985), *The Graduates / Liceenii* (1986) and *Exam in Guidance / Extemporal la dirigentie* (1987) responded to a growing ideological and political focus on the socialist youth and their concerns. In this subsection, I will look at the ways in which these films articulate a case for “falling in love” as an integral and essential component of entering adulthood, while at the same time putting this process in conflict with the possibility of becoming a model socialist citizen.

*Confessions of Love* is the story of classmates Alexandru (Adrian Paduraru) and Ioana (Teodora Mares), two 18-year-olds from different economic backgrounds, who fall in love and trigger the disapproval of some of their teachers, as well as that of Alexandru's mother (Adela Marculescu). Even from the opening credits, the film sets out to paint a picture of youth as an integral part of the socialist society and, most importantly, of the economy. As the names of the cast and crew appear and disappear, sepia picture postcards depicting young construction workers, bare chested and with wide smiles on their faces, succeed one another in the background. Overtly homoerotic, in line with the



socialist ideas of masculinity evident in previous decades, these are Alexandru's memories of the summer spent working on a construction site before he started his senior high-school year. In the 1980s, all Romanian high-school students were required to attend compulsory apprenticeships, called *stagii de practica*, usually in sectors such as construction, agriculture and the industry. These were meant to provide them with the skills and competences necessary in the workplace later in life. The opening of the film is representative of the Romanian Communist Party view that a construction site or a factory were more valuable, and therefore more desirable, places to be for a young man or woman than a university or a higher education institution. Access to universities was limited, and while not discouraged, the practicalities of entering the workforce as soon as one graduated from high-school were given high praise by the Party and by the Nicolae Ceausescu, who was himself someone who had never attended university.

On the first day of school, Alexandru's and his classmates get an assignment from their Philosophy teacher, nicknamed Socrates (played by Ion Caramitru). This assignment involves either writing or recording something which he calls “confessions of love”, that are aimed at providing an “X-ray of the soul relationships between girls and boys”. The “soul relationship” is a literal translation of a commonly used concept in 1980s Romania (as well as after), designating friendships as well as romantic relationships, without acknowledging a physical or sexual component. This is an illustration of how far the official state propaganda could go to rewrite the language, in order to “screen out” any interpretations that may involve sex and sexuality.

Alexandru's classmates laugh and joke about the assignment, while unanimously voting

for Alexandru to be the “male expert” and Ioana, who is passionate about medicine and poetry, the “female expert”, on account of her being a superlative representation of femininity (they call her “the most... and the most...”, suggesting she is the most... everything). The two characters are thus made out to be a socialist equivalent of the “king and queen of the prom”, although at this early point in the film they are not officially a couple yet.

In his spare time, Alexandru reads books like Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, as well as French Romantic poems by Alfred de Musset, which his mother dismisses as trivialities (“jokes”, she calls them). A doctor by profession, the mother is keen that Alexandru follows in her footsteps, and is adamant that he focusses on preparing for admission to medical school. When she finds him reading French literature, she insists: “There is no more time to joke around. You have always been a serious kid”, thereby suggesting that romance and love are pursuits that should not be taken seriously.

Similarly, when Mathematics teacher “Isosceles” (Tamara Buciuceanu-Botez) finds out about Socrates' confessions of love assignment, she deems it to be “both in bad taste, and dangerous”. To this, the Philosophy teacher replies: “It is up to us not to make it in bad taste”. This seems to be the artistic creed of the screenwriter and the director as well: to a certain degree, the film seems to make a case for young love and, more generally, for romantic relationships as the building bricks of a well-rounded individual. Nevertheless, when it comes to depicting the various ways in which the two lead characters express their love for each other, the film brings “tasteful” clichés to the fore. Most of the time, Alexandru and Ioana are dressed in white, to highlight the purity of their love. They also go for long strolls in the park, and even have their own bench,

where the boy would like to kiss her, but she gently (and “appropriately”) stops him. The film they go see at the cinema is *The Quack / Znachor* (Jerzy Hoffman, Poland, 1982), very popular with Romanian audiences, not least due to the idealised romance in which the amnesiac doctor in the title is involved. As the characters on the cinema screen confess their undying love for each other, Alexandru and Ioana have a kiss, only to be sarcastically admonished by the older woman sitting behind them – “Go on, mother, don't be embarrassed. After all, it is a love story”.

Despite any class differences being officially erased by the socialist state, a pervasive class undercurrent is evident in Ioana and Alexandru's relationship. Both Alexandru's mother and Isosceles disapprove of their romantic liaison, and their main argument, apart from Alexandru needing to focus on his studies, is the fact that Ioana is “not for him”. Ioana comes from a broken family: her mother has recently passed away, and Ioana has to look after her younger brother, as her father is an alcoholic factory worker who is almost never around (and whose inebriation eventually causes the death of a co-worker). The two siblings live in a small cramped flat, a far cry from Alexandru's carefully maintained villa, in a time when living in a house was considered a luxury.

While Alexandru's mother is critical of his romantic interest in Ioana, she changes tune when Alexandru starts to spend more time with Mihaela (Carmen Enea), the daughter of some family friends, who aspires to become a lawyer and is, overall, perceived as more class-appropriate.

At the same time, Mihaela's character is used to illustrate the relative decadence of this “higher”, more intellectualised class – and manifestations of sexuality are part of this

critique. She uninhibitedly flirts with Alexandru, in direct opposition to Ioana's timid, working class ways. During a visit that Mihaela and her family pay to Alexandru's family, after the two youngsters go to the boy's room, she starts dancing for him in a semi-hysterical outpouring of unconsumed sexual energy<sup>291</sup>. After this scene, disruptive of the tone of the film, but ideologically appropriate, the two potential lovers raise a glass "to friendship and success", as Mihaela puts it, before Alexandru, flirting back, complements her toast by adding "and to love". The scene cuts to what looks like the morning after, when Mihaela is now at her house, in her bed, on the phone to Alexandru<sup>292</sup>. She tells Alexandru of the dream she just had, in which they danced together all night. Here, the act of dancing is potentially used as a substitute for the sexual act, particularly in light of Mihaela's next line of dialogue – "In dreams, anything is possible. Even...". The unfinished sentence indicates, as elsewhere in the history of Romanian cinema, the allusion to – and ultimately, the elusion of – desire and sexuality. This seems impossible to achieve in the characters' "real life". Later in the film, there is a scene in which Alexandru and Mihaela lie kissing in the long grass, but the appearance of a construction truck nearby interrupts them. As visual metaphors go, as with the anecdote above in which a power cut prevented a teenage boy from watching his first porn film, a stationary symbol of the socialist state (the truck) comes to frustrate desire from being put into practice. As anything else though, this becomes possible "in dreams".

The film denies the possibility for Alexandru's character to find erotic happiness with

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<sup>291</sup> This scene is reminiscent of Dorothy Malone's character Marylee and her "dance of death" in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (USA, 1956).

<sup>292</sup> Similar to *Written on the Wind*'s nymphomaniac Marylee, Mihaela also has a red phone in her room, although the ways in which Corjos uses colour is significantly less complex than Sirk's.

Mihaela. He then goes against his “class” by returning to the construction site where he has worked as an apprentice the previous summer, and is determined to build a career as a construction engineer, like his father, rather than become a doctor, like his mother. He also finally finds out about the tragedy that hit Ioana's family (her father being arrested under suspicion of manslaughter), and travels to meet her at the seaside, where she is spending summer with her brother. Before they run into each other's arms and the frame freezes, two separate montages hint at the (perhaps not so tame) thoughts that each of them has toward the other: in soft light, Ioana's naked shoulders are filmed in close-up, as she brings her hair up to uncover her neck; in a medium long shot, a smiling Alexandru also runs his hands through his hair, as he walks out of the sea, semi-naked. The problem here is that these are only fantasies of erotic fulfilment, which the ending of the film somehow diverts to “reality”. But the “reality” that the film advocates is in itself over-romanticised. The two semi-naked bodies turn to misty silhouettes, draped in white, and embracing on the windy beach, not even allowed to kiss for too long, a piano playing a song of longing as non-diegetic accompaniment. While offering an image of romance as both desirable and possible, *Confessions of Love* makes only one kind of love actually desirable, the one that is pure, and white, and almost ethereal, lacking physicality. It also only makes this possible for one kind of people, those who, while tolerant of intellectual professions, feel most at home within the idealised working class and the state-approved industries.

The next two films in the trilogy, *The Graduates* and *Exam in Guidance*, do not bring much more to the discourse on romance that *Confessions of Love* so gently constructs. *The Graduates* focusses on a group of 16-year-olds at the same high-school. The love

story is more naïvely structured than in the first film, and at the same time more unashamedly ideologically conformant. Young Dana (Oana Sarbu) becomes slowly disillusioned with the selfishness and vanity of her boyfriend Serban, and she falls in love with more modest Mihai (Stefan Banica Jr). However, this new relationship revolves mostly around classroom assignments, and the boy-gets-girl subplot is significantly dependent on the boy's academic success, as well as on the girl's ability to admit that she needs to start wearing glasses (literally). Dana and Mihai bond over compulsory reading, and chess tournaments. Mihai refuses to consider pursuing a romantic relationship with Dana due to his school commitments. Only once he successfully honours these commitments does he allow himself to approach Dana as a romantic interest, which is precisely the type of morals that the socialist state promoted. Either because the characters are only as young as sixteen, or because the film has a stronger message to send out than the possibility of erotic fulfilment of the young generation, the final scene of *The Graduates* sees Dana and Mihai filmed in medium close-up, bringing their lips toward each other to kiss, but not actually getting the chance to do this before the frame freezes.

Similarly, *Exam in Guidance* plays on the same tension between pursuing one's first love and the sacrifices required by the preparation to enter the workforce. Anca (Madalina Pop) is the daughter of Philosophy teacher Socrates (from the first two films). She falls in love with tennis player Doru (Dan Zamfirescu), but her father does not approve of this relationship. While this last film in the trilogy also focuses on the importance of completing one's education over any romantic pursuits, it does so rather less successfully than *The Graduates*.

A key scene is that in which Anca makes plans to spend a weekend in the mountains with Doru, which is something that characters in other films would not have allowed themselves to consider. This leads to an escalation of the conflict between her and her father, who was once supportive of the possibilities of romance – remember *Confessions*.... The father admonishes Anca by pointing out that “it's not appropriate” for her to spend the weekend alone with her boyfriend. When she accuses him of merely being prejudiced, he slaps her. This type of behaviour, within the world of the film, not only seems perfectly acceptable, but is also effective, as it prompts Anca to change her mind and cancel the trip to the mountains. Sadly, *Exam in Guidance* just goes to show how, despite bursts of feminism, the Romanian socialist ideology is still deeply patriarchal. It also dangerously puts physical violence forward as a mode of regulating sexual morality, in an era where the autonomy of desire is, if not “in bad taste”, then at least “dangerous”.

## **VII.5. Mircea Daneliuc and the Critique of the Dominant Morality**

After his debut in the late 1970s, writer-director Mircea Daneliuc became one of the most important filmmakers in 1980s Romania, due to the subversive nature of his cinema in relation to both the dominant ideology and to the dominant style of filmmaking. Significantly, this subversiveness is also apparent in Daneliuc's honest and frank treatment of sexuality: unconventional relationships, embodiments of femininity and masculinity that go against the norm, as well as a more relaxed approach to representing sexual desire and the sexual act itself. This is evident not necessarily in the way that Daneliuc handles these cinematically, but rather in that he deals with them at

all. This is not to suggest that Daneliuc's films have the audacity and the complexity of a Makavejev, for example. There are critical voices that accuse him of being overly metaphorical, and not even as radical as one would like to think (e.g. Popescu<sup>293</sup>). However, given the Romanian context, with the almost all-encompassing ideological elimination of eroticism from vision, he is a true exception.

Daneliuc directed his first film, *The Long Drive / Cursa*, in 1978. Even though he did not write the script himself (as he would do for his future films), some of the trademarks of Daneliuc's treatment of romance and sexuality are evident here. From a narrative point of view, the story is rather straightforward: two men, Anghel (Mircea Albulescu) and Panait (Constantin Diplan), are assigned the task of transporting a gigantic piece of machinery to a mine in Northern Romania. At a bus stop, they meet Maria (Tora Vasilescu), who is also travelling up north in order to see her husband, who works in the same mine. After her money is stolen overnight, Maria agrees to travel with the two men in their lorry, and she and Anghel gradually fall in love.

Anghel's physical appearance is ursine, his features do not make him conventionally attractive. He is grumpy, and he does not like to talk. When he does talk, there is always a hint of anger and discontent in his voice. By contrast, Panait is the prototypical image of the socialist worker. He is lean and athletic, always smiling, always willing to help, bright and optimistic. In a conventionally socialist love story, Maria would certainly fall in love with Panait rather than Anghel (or, even more accurately, in a conventionally socialist love story, a married woman would probably not allow herself to love anyone

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<sup>293</sup> Popescu, *Filmul surd*.



other than her husband). The ending of the film does succumb to the ideological punishing of the two unconventional lovers, as Maria runs away when the reasons concerning her visit to the mine are questioned (indeed, it remains unclear whether she is even married). In state socialism, two social outcasts can only be denied a future together.

The third film that Daneliuc made in the 1980s, *Microphone Test / Proba de microfon*, truly put Daneliuc on the map. It has also been acknowledged as one of the best Romanian films of all time, according to a critics' poll from 2010<sup>294</sup>. *Microphone Test* sees Daneliuc on his second collaboration with Tora Vasilescu (the two got married after working on *The Long Drive* together). As well as writing and directing the film, he also plays the lead role, that of Nelu, a TV cameraman. Initially, he is in a relationship with Luiza (Gina Patrichi), a glacial, sharply intelligent, no-nonsense TV reporter. While working on a feature, the two journalists meet Ani (Tora Vasilescu), a young woman with no prospects, the complete opposite of the idealised image of youth promoted by the communist ideology (she is, to a degree, reminiscent of the nonconformist character of Ruxandra in the censored *A Film with a Charming Girl*). Ani has no job, no family, no money, and is an outsider in Bucharest. She is also outspoken and fiery, and does not see herself as sexually inferior to a man. Her appearance is entirely atypical and almost unique in the grim and desolate tableau of filmic femininity under late state socialism (even Luiza exoticises her by comparing her to “a gazelle”). Ani wears heavy make-up and colourful backless dresses. In a sense, the red leather jacket that Maria wears in *The Long Drive* paves the way for the vitality that

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<sup>294</sup> Corciovescu, Cristina ed. *Cele mai bune 10 filme romanesti ale tuturor timpurilor, stabilite prin votul a 40 de critici*. Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2010.

Vasilescu's characters would embody in Daneliuc's later films, including *Microphone Test*.

Sex as primal energy, and as a life force, makes Daneliuc's approach to desire and sexuality completely atypical for what Romanian films offered up to this point (and, to an extent, for what they would offer from this point onwards, at least until the 1990s). For the first time in a Romanian film, the intercourse is not only "shown" on screen, but it is also invested with little dramatic function other than the pure enjoyment and pleasure of the characters, i.e. Nelu and Ani. In a sex scene which happens about halfway through the film, the camera is fixed on Ani's face as she enjoys Nelu's naked body on top of her. Despite being in a position in which she does not have much control, Daneliuc frames Ani as being the most powerful of the two, with Nelu wiggling and hesitating to find his way around her body. When the doorbell rings, Nelu panics and wants to stop, but Ani demands that he does not. Their first sexual encounter happens earlier in the film, and is only briefly hinted at: aurally, with a faint moan; visually, with the camera positioned so as to only capture the wall behind the bed and the nightstand beside it, as a hand enters the frame from below and knocks a fruit bowl over, while struggling to turn the lamp off. Afterwards, Nelu and Ani lie in Nelu's bed, naked and smoking. They talk about trivial things, and they listen to a jazz rendition of Bach's Air on the G String piece from Suite no. 3, with a Leonard Cohen vinyl cover visible in the background. Once more, this goes completely against the ideological concerns of socialism, according to which whatever the communist citizen did had to be productive, and useful to the whole of society. Daneliuc subverts this by allowing his camera to dwell on this intimate setting, where two lovers can simply be individuals

rather than mere citizens.

It is fascinating to see Daneliuc actually getting away with this candid approach to sexuality, although some compromises have undoubtedly been made. A widespread practice during these years was to insert more “scandalous” scenes, which the filmmaker knew for sure would be rejected, in the copy submitted for the censors’ approval. This was done in order to save other, comparatively harmless, scenes, which could be potentially more effective than the blatantly explicit ones (this was common practice in most film industries of the Eastern Bloc, in fact). Censorship also tended to lead to more creative approaches, as artists had to think of ingenious ways to subversively send messages across. Superficially harmless imagery could be made to look almost pornographic. Daneliuc actually does this in *Microphone Test*, when, in a long shot, his camera lingers on a public park attendant who washes down the statue of a nude woman, as his water hose is suggestively propped between the man’s legs.

The ending of *Microphone Test* could be read as a compromise with censorship, or, rather, as a compromise in disguise. As Nelu returns from his compulsory military training, he finds Ani expecting a child from another man. Her appearance has changed so that she now conforms to the austere image of femininity moulded by state socialism, in stark contrast to her exoticism earlier in the film. Her hair is now tied up and she is wearing a standard, run-of-the-mill grey coat, as she stands guiltily before of Nelu and confesses that she was “in need of a man, in need of a house”. For the communist censorship, this may equate to Ani’s punishment for her reckless ways, but, in the wider context of the film, it only represents another piece in Daneliuc's argument against the

oppressive influence that society has on individuality and on non-conformity. He would take this theme to even higher stakes in his next film, *The Cruise / Croaziera* (Romania, 1981).

Where *Microphone Test* is the story of two individuals trapped in the social mire, *The Cruise*, as a narrative, is much more complex, and also encompasses more, as it focusses on the mire itself, and on the mechanisms that govern its existence. *The Cruise* is also a more metaphorical film. On the one hand, narrative and visual metaphors are becoming Daneliuc's trademark, but on the other their use could also be interpreted as a safe strategy, meant to protect the film from the scissors of the censors. The plot of *The Cruise* revolves around a group of young workers from across the country, both men and women, who take part in a cruise on the Danube River, as a prize for winning various workers' competitions throughout the year. They gradually clash with the cruise organisers, an older generation, representative of the repressive and illogical socialist state, as Daneliuc suggests. Without addressing all the multiple and complex interpretations that the film offers, I will briefly look into how it deals with the theme of love and sexuality.

As the opening credits roll over images of boats in a port, a popular song is heard diegetically, as if from an unseen radio. It is not the type of song one could hear on Romanian radios during the 1980s though. It originates from the urban slums, rather than from the idealised rural tradition bearing the state's stamp of approval. It is a song of jealousy, in which the male singer addresses his female lover, Magdalena:

“Magdalena, say it straight / Who was it that bit your breast?/ [... then Magdalena's

reply] / When I went into the garden / A busy bee flew straight onto my skin / [... then her lover again] / Magdalena, why do you lie to me? / I know there are no teeth on a bee“. The powerful imagery (of passionate bite marks on a woman's breasts) is in stark contrast not so much with the images on screen, but with the scene that they cut to. In this, Comrade Proca (Nicolae Albani) and the rest of the organising committee address the young cruise participants, in a setting strikingly similar to meetings of the Romanian Communist Party.

When he introduces the trip, Proca uses a sort of *langue de bois*, typical of socialist apparatchiks. For example, he refers to the supposedly fun trip as “organising the time in a most pleasant manner”. Seemingly addressing only the male participants, he draws their attention to the fact that “among us, there are also girls, comrades” – though Albani's intonation makes this sound as “girl-comrades”. This functions like a misogynistic wink. Women are something that men should take notice of, not necessarily in order for men to “behave” around, but rather to identify them as potential prey for these hunting males (including Proca himself). This is further confirmed by the boys whistling in admiration, with Proca adding: “Let's ensure that they [the girls] feel good, because then we will also feel good”. Superficially, this sounds like the type of thing a devoted apparatchik would say, but it does not have the desired effect, and it merely adds to the objectification effect that the previous line has.

As they do in *Microphone Test*, Daneliuc himself and Vasilescu play a couple here, Lili and Vladi. Once more, it is the female character, Lili, who is the dominant one in the relationship, with the male rather de-masculinised. They are not necessarily the central

characters anymore, as the action shifts from one set of characters to another, as do the characters' erotic pursuits. Proca, however, seems to be the centre of gravity, mirroring the social reality closely, with the cult of personality around Romania's leader ever intensifying.

Despite continually arguing that he would not want to give the impression that “these youngsters are one and we are another”, Proca manages to do exactly that, while at the same time revealing that, ultimately, he is as driven by sexual desire as any of the youngsters. It is, again, a hypocritical behaviour quite common in state socialist Romania, and representative of the “doublethink” mentioned here before, e.g. one would not have to love Nicolae Ceausescu, one would just have to say they do. Proca is intent on imposing rules and discipline on all the cruise participants, and he follows this in his private life too, but the reality is messier than he constructs it: he has violent arguments with his wife, which culminate with him admitting that he has repeatedly cheated on her with two of her friends.

As in *Microphone Test*, sex is visible in this film too. This time, however, authority lurks about. Toward the beginning of the film, as they are about to kiss in an empty theatre hall, Lili and Vladi are taken by surprise by a member of the organising committee walking through the door, with no real purpose other than to supervise their encounter. Kisses are stolen, and hands are held in the dark, where no one can see. One of Lili and Vladi's later encounters happens in a bush outside a dormitory. The scene is more awkward than what Ani and Nelu experience in *Microphone Test*. With Donna Summer's *Hot Stuff* playing diegetically (original Western disco music was something

unusual in Romanian films of the 1980s, though it was quite common in real life), Lili and Vladi kiss and fondle each other, but they also talk. “Let's go for a walk”, Vladi suggests, and Lili replies “Is walking what you're in the mood for now? Go on, leave me alone, I've got so much work to do”. She still lets herself be kissed, knowing well enough there is no work to be done that late at night, particularly when on holiday. The characters’ dialogue contrasts with their actions, which is another subversive move on Daneliuc's part. It is aimed at making the characters socially acceptable at a declarative level (they want to be seen as wanting to do purer, more productive things), while in reality they are interested and engaged in something that the official discourse discourages, i.e. sex. In the same scene, Daneliuc also plays with the actual representational void of sex and sexuality on Romanian screens. It has now become the stuff of jokes and anecdotes, but for a long while in Romania, whenever a group of male viewers would go to the cinema, they would sit in the back row and, whenever two characters on-screen would kiss, they would shout at the male character: “You! Fuck her!”. In *The Cruise*, as Lili and Vladi passionately kiss and fondle each other, a masculine voice shouts off-screen “You! Kiss her!”. On the one hand, this is Daneliuc's way of getting around censorship, while giving a wink to audiences knowledgeable enough to understand the joke.

As argued elsewhere in this study, the control that the socialist state had on its citizens led to a culture of secrecy, which in turn gave birth to various mechanisms of protection, of self-realisation and of entertainment, far from the scrutinising eyes of the party. In *The Cruise*, Daneliuc picks up on this and morphs it into something called “the spoon game”. The game involves the cruise participants, boys and girls alike, gathering

into one room. Taking turns, each of them is blindfolded and, holding a spoon, has to try and recognise the others by touching them with the spoon. This has obvious erotic connotations: when not allowed to touch each other directly, they develop ways of touching each other by proxy, with a semi-phallic shaped object. The game functions like a substitute for intercourse or, in cinematic terms, for making sexual intercourse visible.

Later in the film, Vladi tries to book a hotel room, away from the crowded dormitories, so that he can finally spend a night together with Lili. But there is another co-cruiser there, with his female friend. As this man and woman ascend the stairs to their room, and as Vladi begs the receptionist to give him a room, the looks that Vladi and the man exchange say everything. Each of them will be doing the same thing, and each of them knows what the other one will be doing, but none of them can acknowledge this using words. As Lili packs her bag for her night at the hotel, her roommate tells her “I think I'll go play a spoon”. The game is once more associated with the sexual act: if one can't afford the privacy to do the latter, one does the former<sup>295</sup>.

The spoon game becomes so popular that even Proca's wife gets involved. She is a woman deprived of marital affection, and while she would like to enjoy the company of the young men and women, she is often reduced to the role of caring wife, who irons her husband's shirts while he reads the paper. Aroused by the sight of young women in

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<sup>295</sup> Earlier in the same scene, Lili's roommate asks her whether she'd like some “Jubileu” (“Jubilee”) perfume. “Is it good?”, Lili asks. “You can't find it”, her roommate replies. This is a brief exchange, but one in which Daneliuc acknowledges the deteriorating economic situation of the country, with “luxury” items such as perfume (which can be used to increase one's sex appeal) being the first to be sacrificed.



bathing suits, Proca gives in to his sexual urges and initiates intercourse with his wife, but the two are interrupted by one of those young women, who comes in to ask Mrs Proca whether she wants to play the spoon. The man's suspicious nature overtakes his sexual interest in his wife, and he sends her off "to play that spooning<sup>296</sup> game", sarcastically telling her she does not need to make "conjugal obligations" for herself. This dysfunctional relationship between married husband and wife would become one of the main themes in Daneliuc's post-1989 masterpiece, *The Conjugal Bed / Patul conjugal* (Romania, 1993), discussed in the next chapter. However, *The Cruise* remains one of the subtlest and most effective indictments of the Romanian socialist regime, and in particular of the alienating ways in which state ideology mutilated individual sexual expression.

## **VII.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the ways in which the increasingly repressive socialist context, marked by economic penury and a hardening ideological stance, shaped representations of sex and sexuality in 1980s Romanian cinema. I have shown how the increasing methods of dissent and subversiveness were augmented by the increased restrictions themselves. To illustrate this, I have explored the widespread system of illicit film distribution that flourished during the decade, and the ways in which this facilitated access to films in which sex and sexuality are visible. This underground practice contested the state's owned assigned meanings and practices, and reclaimed film sexuality as something to be enjoyed or interacted with in ways closer to what

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<sup>296</sup> Another possible reading of the game, hinting at displays of intimacy through the reference to "spooning".

“plastic sexuality” involves, i.e. freed from the restrictions of reproductive purposes.

On the other hand, I have also argued that the puritanical socialist ideology surrounding sexuality and relationships was reinforced in the popular films that constitute what I call the *High School Trilogy*. The evident didactic trajectory of these films eschewed issues of teenage sexuality and mutated them into “matters of the heart”, thus deepening the lack of real sex education promoted by the youth manuals discussed in Chapter VI. I have also explored the complex ways in which the state ideology could be critiqued and opposed, by analysing in detail two films by maverick director Mircea Daneliuc. In his case, it is almost a metacritique, as *The Cruise* builds an almost Aesopian discourse on power and sexuality, where one needs to read the spaces between the frames (and the lines) to make meaning. As in *The Cruise*, what I hope is evident in this chapter is the continuation, but also the complication, of the tension between the visibility of sexual representations and the frustration of this visibility through the state’s ideological interruptions.



**PART III: ROMANIA AFTER STATE  
SOCIALISM**

## **Chapter VIII: Bikini in the Ashes of Empire. The Nakedness of the Postcommunist Thaw**

After the 1989 revolution, which brought the demise of state socialism in Romania in a similar manner to other Eastern European states, the country jumped head-on into a process of renewal and liberalisation that affected all major areas of public life. These transition-related changes had a big impact on sex and sexuality as well, which saw an openness that starkly contrasted with the repression of the communist years. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which cinema reflected and shaped these tensions. While topics related to sexuality began to be, if not explored on a thematic level, at least present or visible, in Romanian films, society more generally was marked by conflicts between acceptable and condemnable sexual behaviour and practices, torn between Western aspirations and lifestyles, and the newly reborn Christian Orthodox morality.

### **VIII.1. Political Changes. New Faces, New Fantasies**

Romania's socialist leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, and his wife Elena, were executed on 25 December 1989, following the 16-22 December anti-communist revolution. The term would be better placed in inverted commas because, despite being overwhelmingly known as a revolution, the actual events remain contested even to this day, and various interest groups have different versions of the facts as well as different interpretations of what has actually happened<sup>297</sup>.

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<sup>297</sup> This inability to pinpoint the main actors and the actual events are the subject of Corneliu Porumboiu's feature film debut, the comedy *A fost sau n-a fost? / 12:08 East of Bucharest* (Romania, 2006).

One thing was certain though: the country put an official end to the communist rule, and the transition to democracy began, as was repeatedly proclaimed on television during the days, months and years following the December uprising. I would like to stress the word “official”, as the vast majority of those who took power during those turbulent times were in fact lower-rank members of the former Communist Party, who by no means represented a clean slate. They were a rather undemocratic, reactionary group, which painted itself as progressive but which lacked the skills, tools and, often, the will to actually be so.

The first “free” elections in post-communist Romania took place in June 1990. Ion Iliescu was elected president, having earned an overwhelming majority of the public vote. He had official connections to the old Communist Party, having served as Secretary of State for Youth in the 1970s, as well as director of the Political Publishing House, a division of the state-controlled publishing industry before 1989. Despite this, Iliescu's public persona, which projected a playful masculinity, as well as joy and optimism, was an important factor in his election as president, although the fact that his entourage took control over the national radio and television was also key in sending his message across to the masses.

While Iliescu was clearly liked by the public, the ultimate political crush of the early 1990s was prime-minister Petre Roman. Same as Iliescu, he was one of those who took over to the public television in December '89 to announce Ceausescu's death. He was also a founding member of the National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Nationale, FSN), led by Iliescu. Roman's youthful appearance, as well as his nonchalant, relaxed

manner, deeply contrasted with the decade-old image of the stern and inscrutable men in power, rarely below middle age, who had surrounded Ceausescu for decades. In retrospect, Roman's figure was also strikingly (and somewhat paradoxically) similar to the shiny and sunny socialist ideal of masculinity, although he was definitely not working class (his family were part of the Romanian communist nomenklatura). Roman's public persona went beyond criteria of likeability and charisma, and he penetrated the collective imagination, becoming an obscure object of desire.<sup>298</sup> Roman's sex appeal was so widespread that Romanian housewives named a traybake recipe after him (it contains walnuts and soft meringue). There is also a popular anecdote about female workers from a Bucharest factory, who invented a rhyme pinpointing the prime-minister's desirability over financial gain, which was also extremely attractive in early post-communism: "Nu vrem bani, nu vrem valuta / Vrem ca Roman sa ne futa", which translates roughly as "We don't want money, we don't want currency / We only want Roman to fuck us".<sup>299</sup>

While it may be tempting to assert that the sex appeal of its leaders was crucial in the political success of the FSN, it was in fact their seemingly democratic project and their stated intention of taking Romania into the Euro-Atlantic Structures (NATO and the EU) that appealed to the majority of Romanians, who had spent decades dreaming about Western goods and Western lifestyles. The term "reform" (political, but mostly

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<sup>298</sup> I remember one of the girls I used to play with as children (7-8 years old), who one day came out and told all the kids that one of her mother's friends had a dream that she was kissing Petre Roman.

<sup>299</sup> This is also reminiscent of a rallying cry heard in the winter days of the anti-communist revolution, which announces women's much awaited sexual revolution. In the city of Galati, a young woman who had practised prostitution during communism, named Mariana Babos and nicknamed "Cur-de-Fier" (Iron Bum), climbed up to the balcony of the County Council and proclaimed: "Girls, go and fuck, girls, no one is stopping us now! It is freedom now, it's good! Go and fuck!".

administrative and institutional) became so widely used that by the middle of the decade it had almost lost its meaning. In fact, as several authors have shown, the government's efforts rarely led to effective and long-term changes, due mostly to an innate resistance to change, as well as to the appeal of easy work and easy money, which the liberalised economy and its gaps now made possible. FSN itself proved to be less radical than the initial promise, due precisely to these cultural and institutional specificities, something which prompted Ion Iliescu to famously assert that Romania was an “original democracy”. The originality, as it would turn out, was embodied by deviations from the democratic principles, in order to justify the lack of political and ideological commitment.

## **VIII.2. Social Changes. Rebalancing Gender and Sexuality**

In a similar manner to the rest of the Eastern European countries behind the Iron Curtain, the economic and institutional changes led to a few significant mutations, as far as gender roles and gender performativity are concerned, as Stulhofer and Sandfort detail in their introduction to *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia*<sup>300</sup>. Firstly, the fall of the old economic order affected women more than men. They were the first to lose their jobs, and the last to be considered for new jobs. Stulhofer and Sandfort introduce the concept of the “feminisation of poverty”<sup>301</sup>, to indicate the fact that women became overrepresented among the unemployed, a situation perpetuated throughout the decade, and indeed well into the 2000s, not least due to women's underrepresentation in politics. On the other hand, the rising challenges

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<sup>300</sup> Stulhofer, Aleksandar, and Theo Sandfort, eds. *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2005, 10.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



of job insecurity, inflation and low wages also affected men and ideas of masculinity. Stulhofer and Sandfort bring forward P. Watson's concept of “masculine anomie” to refer to the high mortality rates among men immediately after the fall of Socialism in Eastern Europe<sup>302</sup>, but they also explain how the “collective male identity crisis” among younger, more urban generations was resolved by resorting to “a Westernlike professional image”, which, in middle-aged and older men, translated into “embezzlement, materialism, and cynicism”<sup>303</sup>.

Another important (if not the most important) factor in the changing social landscape of 1990s Romania was the reinvigoration of religious faith. The fall of socialism saw the Orthodox Church regain the public's attention and affection, not necessarily as compensation for the communist years, but rather due to the increasing disaffection, confusion and disorientation caused by the economic and institutional changes. This process was not uncommon across Eastern Europe (in contrast with democracies in the West, where religiosity actually decreased during the '90s), but by the end of the decade Romania had one of the highest percentages of citizens who considered themselves religious – 84.8%, second only to Poland's 93.9%, and considerably higher than the Eastern European average of 65.7%<sup>304</sup>.

The Romanian Orthodox Church had an extremely important role in shaping the public discourse on sexuality, something which Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan, on the one

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 8.

hand<sup>305</sup>, and Voichita Nachescu, on the other<sup>306</sup>, have researched in detail. The resurrection of the Church meant that its regressive (and at the same time, hypocritical) social stance<sup>307</sup>, somewhat sublimated during Communism, also regained power, perhaps more virulently than before. With Romania beginning official talks on its accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures at the beginning of the decade, its human rights record became a problem it needed to address, particularly as far as minorities – and especially sexual minorities – were concerned.

During state socialism, same-sex relationships were an offence punishable by imprisonment, according to Article 200 of the Romanian Penal Code, adopted in 1968 (less than two years after abortion was also criminalised). However, the legal framework was merely a reflection of the society's overall attitude to homosexuality, and things did not change much by the 1990s. According to a 1993 poll quoted by Turcescu and Stan, 80% of Romanians thought that “homosexual acts were never justified, and the complete eradication of homosexuality served a legitimate national interest”<sup>308</sup>. Thus, with the Orthodox Church so embedded in the national identity<sup>309</sup>, same-sex relationships were not just seen as being against God, but against Romania and the Romanians as well. Similarly to the anti-intersectional way in which right-wing

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<sup>305</sup> Turcescu and Stan, *Religion, Politics and Sexuality in Romania*.

<sup>306</sup> Nachescu, Voichita. “Hierarchies of Difference: National Identity, Gay and Lesbian Rights, and the Church in Postcommunist Romania”. In *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia*, edited by Aleksandar Stulhofer and Theo Sandfort. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>307</sup> Turcescu and Stan explain that, traditionally, the mentality of Romanians, heavily influenced by the Church, has been that of “conservative villages, which rejected homosexuality, scorned prostitutes, while tacitly accepting adulterous husbands, and denounced abortion, while developing an impressive knowledge of medicinal plants able to induce it” (Turcescu and Stan, *Religion, Politics and Sexuality...*, 291).

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>309</sup> This is something that goes back to the times of the Iron Guard, an extremely popular far-right nationalist group, that ravaged the country in the 1930s.

philosopher Nae Ionescu had questioned the possibility of a Jewish person to be also conceived as Romanian<sup>310</sup>, by the fall of state socialism the vast majority of people seemed to think that being gay or lesbian was not compatible with being Romanian. This attitude carried on into the new millennium: in 2001, more than four out of five Romanians declared, in a similar poll, that they would not want a gay or lesbian person as a neighbour<sup>311</sup>. This attitude is prevalent nowadays in countries such as Russia and, in fact, many of the former Eastern Bloc countries, as well as in more infamously anti-LGBT regimes, such as Uganda or Tanzania.

On the other hand, Romania faced increasing pressure from Western institutions to address the stringent issue of human rights. In 1995, when the Constitutional Court asked the Church, the political class, the academia and the civil society for their position on the constitutionality of Article 200, it was only organisations from the latter category that called for its repeal. All religious denominations denounced homosexuality, and the Romanian Senate argued that the ban on homosexuality was constitutional, and in line with the European Human Rights Convention. Nevertheless, the Court ruled that Article 200 was unconstitutional. It would take until 2000, when the Council of Europe threatened to restart Romania's monitoring of its human rights record, that homosexuality was fully decriminalised.

What stands out in this debate is the Orthodox Church's attitude toward the issue, which reflected that of the majority of the population. Patriarch Teoctist, for example,

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<sup>310</sup> Ionescu, Nae. "Preface". In *De doua mii de ani...* by Mihail Sebastian. Bucharest: Editura Cartex, 2016 [1934].

<sup>311</sup> Turcescu and Stan, *Religion, Politics and Sexuality*, 292.

repeatedly condemned “the acceptance of the degradingly abnormal and unnatural lifestyle as normal and legal”, and urged the political class to “defend human dignity, the moral health of the people, the stability of the family and the spiritual rebirth of Romanian society”<sup>312</sup>. This is another example of how nationalist rhetoric worked in conjunction with religion to attack and suppress what was essentially the freedom of sexual expression, by constructing it as being alien to a fixed, indivisible and immutable identity, that of “Romanian”. The repelling of the anti-abortion decree (days after the fall of state socialism) was also negatively received by the Orthodox Church, given that the legalisation of abortions in the new democracy quickly led to Romania becoming the European country with the highest abortion rates. The Church called for legislation to curb the ever-decreasing population numbers, although not as virulently as they were against homosexuality.

As in most other Eastern European countries, the transition to democracy also saw the sex industry booming in Romania. Due to the economic context, in which they were, if not unemployed, then at least paid very low wages, many young women (and men), particularly from small towns but not only, saw prostitution as an opportunity to overcome the difficult living conditions. Romanian escorts were cheap and available, and throughout the decade they became a negative staple of Romania's image abroad (just as the abandoned orphans and orphanages were, immediately before and after the fall of state socialism). Human trafficking from the East to the West flourished in the 1990s, and young Romanians from poor villages (often sold into sexual slavery by their own financially bankrupt families) were a common offering, alongside Serbs, Albanians

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 295.

and Croatians. In response to these worrying trends, MP Mariana Stoica called for the legalisation of prostitution in 1998, but the overwhelmingly male Romanian Parliament never put the issue up for debate. When brought to the table again, in the early 2000s, the Orthodox Church rallied against the initiative, and launched a series of social programmes against prostitution, with Patriarch Teoctist deeming a bill to legalise it as “anti-Christian”.

The aggressive conservatism of the Orthodox Church toward these issues was directly opposed to another important development in society, that of democratic access to the Western culture and “lifestyles” (discussed below). To this day, this contradiction has not come to a resolution, as reactionary attitudes still visibly cohabit with more progressive ones, within the overall society, as well as within its subdivisions and, often, within a single individual.

### **VIII.3. Importing Popular Culture. The Ascent of Western Film and Television**

An important change brought by the 1989 revolution was the liberalisation of the media and the arts. Censorship was officially eliminated, and access to Western culture became unrestricted. Novels previously unpublished, or films previously re-cut or prohibited altogether, were now published and shown as widely as possible, often illegally, i.e. without paying copyright fees. Anyone could copy entire music albums from original cassettes (now the preferred medium to listen to music, to the detriment of vinyl), and then set up a stand in the city market, where they could sell these without anyone questioning their provenance. Customers did not care much about the legality of

these new attractions, considering it much less important than finally getting the opportunity to listen to (or read, or see) them.

Erotica played an important part in the financial success of these illegal endeavours. Novels by American authors Danielle Steel, Nora Roberts, but most notably Sandra Brown, with strong (heterosexual) erotic themes and language, were selling “like warm bread” (to use a Romanian expression), undoubtedly helped by suggestive cover illustrations depicting semi-nude strong men and lascivious women in passionate embraces. These romance novels were so popular that new titles were being published once every couple of weeks. Women were the primary audience for these books. For the first time in decades, they were given an opportunity to access sexual knowledge beyond the purely biological aspects, albeit muddled by melodramatic characters and plots. Although many of the female characters depicted in these books were moulded on stereotypes (the woman as submissive, fragile, waiting to be swept off her feet by assertive, slightly older men), these novels had an important role in giving legitimacy to female desire. To what extent this was actually internalised and actualised by these female readers is open to debate (and to further research).

The media was also conquered by the appeal of sex and sexuality, which guaranteed good sales figures. New weekly and monthly magazines were being published, with titles such as *Blitz!* (which focussed on celebrities and on sensational sex-themed news stories), or *The Pink Criminal / Infrectoarea roz* (which published allegedly real-life stories of crime, violence and sex). These magazines put the spotlight not so much on text and content, as on titillating photographs of nude, or semi-nude women (once more,

without proper credit or copyright). The mid- to late 1990s saw pornography legitimised (and somewhat more regulated), with the publication of Romanian editions of magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. While glossier and more expensive, they still objectify young women in the same way as their cheaper, poorer quality precursors mentioned above.

For the vast majority of Romanian men, these Westernised magazines were almost a luxury, as they were barely affordable. Nevertheless, they found a way into men's lives with the help of mainstream media. Starting broadcast on 1 December 1995 (the date which, since the revolution, has replaced 23 August as the National Day of Romania), Pro TV was one of the first private television stations in the country. It quickly became more popular than the already liberalised TVR (Televiziunea Romana, the national, state-owned broadcaster). Pro TV played an important role in launching and promoting *Playboy* magazine in Romania, as both enterprises were part of the newly created MediaPro media trust, owned by businessman Adrian Sarbu. The first edition of the Romanian *Playboy* boosted the profile of socialite Dana Savuica, who became famous as the first Romanian ever to pose nude for a men's magazine (she would also, in later years, host a late-night talk-show on themes of sex and sexuality). Pop star Loredana Groza, gymnast Corina Ungureanu, and many other famous Romanians would later appear in the pages of *Playboy*. While this can certainly be seen as reinforcing a tradition of objectification of a submissive female body, it can also be read as an honest attempt to make sexuality something worth talking about, as well as to encourage the right of women to enjoy and display their own bodies, a view adopted by Savuica and Groza themselves.

These magazines were exclusively aimed at male audiences though. There were no female-centric sex magazines, nor was the male body similarly exposed across the spectrum of popular publications. This acted as a re-enforcement of the dominant patriarchal idea that heterosexual male sexuality and heterosexual male desire were somehow more valid, and therefore more deserving of attention, than female sexuality. The post-communist democratisation led to a liberalisation of sexual expression, but less so to one of sexual roles, thus maintaining the distinct categories male-subject / female-object. When the male does become an object, it is never in sexual or erotic contexts, but rather in situations where male prowess and force are asserted. It was in this way that American action films also earned a high degree of popularity in the 1990s, once more with the help of commercial TV stations (particularly Pro TV), although they also grossed highly at the Romanian box-office. For instance, seven of the top 10 highest-grossing films of 1996 were male-centric action-adventure, sci-fi or spy flicks: *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, USA, 1996); *Desperado* (Robert Rodriguez, USA, 1995); Jean-Claude van Damme vehicle *Sudden Death* (Peter Hyams, USA, 1995); *Assassins* (Richard Donner, France / USA, 1995); *The Quest* (Jean-Claude van Damme, USA / Canada, 1996); *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (John McTiernan, USA, 1996); *GoldenEye* (Martin Campbell, UK / USA, 1995). In all fairness, Hollywood action films were already very much in demand even before 1989, as illustrated by the discussion on “underground” video distribution in the previous chapter. However, the 1990s brought them into the mainstream, possibly in response to an unacknowledged need of the atrophied masculinity to be symbolically reinvigorated.



Audiences for melodramas were not forgotten either. TVR restarted the broadcast of *Dallas*, interrupted in the 1980s. *Dallas* was not *exclusively* aimed at female audiences, as Ien Ang convincingly argues<sup>313</sup>: its popularity has transcended categories of nation, gender, or class. The saga of the rich Ewing family, created as a prime-time soap opera, appealed to Romanian audiences even more after 1990 than it did in the '80s. It has often been argued that *Dallas* helped overturn communism in Romania<sup>314</sup>, mainly due to the ways in which it glamorised the American lifestyle, which pauperised and oppressed Romanians yearned for. In fact, the show's appeal is much more complex, and it involves many more factors, as Ang strives to demonstrate in her book. The way in which the melodramatic imagination works within the popularity framework is a much more plausible hypothesis, as it fits more with the economic, social and private contexts of Romanian viewers, both in the 1980s and the 1990s (when the specificities changed, but the paradigms underlining them did not). Using Peter Brook's definition of the "melodramatic imagination", Ang argues that this should be seen as "a psychological strategy to overcome the material meaninglessness of everyday existence"<sup>315</sup>. In the moral void and the confusion generated by the transition years, this is likely to have developed among Romanian audiences.

Whereas men were more likely to compensate (or fill the void) by involving themselves in illicit enterprises, or in cultural practices that reaffirmed masculine values (as detailed above), the media perceived women to have a much better chance of being held captive

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<sup>313</sup> Ang, Ien. *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Dramatic Imagination*. Translated by Della Couling. London and New York: Routledge, 1985.

<sup>314</sup> E.g. Gillespie, Nick and Matt Welch. "How *Dallas* Won the Cold War". <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/25/AR2008042503103.html>. February, 9, 2016.

<sup>315</sup> Ang, *Watching Dallas...*, 79.

by romance-infused cultural products. The Romanian society associated fragility, high emotionality, and family-related concerns with the specific experience of femininity, and the media fully exploited this by heavily catering to these traits. In the early 1990s, TVR started broadcasting Latin American soap operas, or *telenovelas*, some of which became the most popular TV programmes in Romania for decades to come (nowadays, their provenance is more varied, as it includes Turkish and even Korean soaps). By the end of the decade, the main provider of *telenovelas* was Acasa TV (which translates as Home TV), a MediaPro TV station aimed at female audiences. As a component of their appeal to the “melodramatic imagination”, which they most certainly share with English-speaking soap operas, it is worth pointing out the remark made by Chris Barker that “the core of the telenovela's discourse is the achievement of happiness through heterosexual love”<sup>316</sup>, which helps understand the popular appeal of this format with Romanian female audiences. This is particularly true if one corroborates it with women’s perpetual exclusion from the public sphere (in which, therefore, they have few chances to succeed), as well as with the inheritance of the “double burden”, which only starts to ease up over the last decade or so. Another reason for the popularity of *telenovelas* could also be that of linguistic similarities (Romanian being a Romans language, same as Spanish and Brazilian-Portuguese).

Stars of *Dallas*, as well as those of the never ending stream of Latin American telenovelas, had an appeal for Romanian audiences that goes beyond the melodramatic imagination. The melodramatic characters they embody are factored into this, but the actors themselves became huge stars in Romania, some more so than mainstream

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<sup>316</sup> Barker, Chris. *Global Television. An Introduction*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 1997, 89.

Hollywood actors (which I will cover below). Female singers and actors, such as Thalia or Natalia Oreiro, but also male actors such as Osvaldo Rios, suddenly inhabited the viewers' imagination, and triggered both identification processes and erotic desire, i.e. they wanted to be like those women, and with those men, or viceversa.

While this disjunction between male and female audiences is accurate as far as mature audiences are concerned, things look slightly different when it comes to younger audiences. The openness to popular culture brought a more distinct embodiment of the teen age, with its distinct concerns and cultural specificities. Once more, the media did not fail to cater to this new category of public. Magazines dedicated to teenagers were published only a few years after the fall of state socialism, with immediate success. The most notable was the Bucharest-based *Salut*, modelled on Western teenage magazines such as *Bravo* or *Popcorn*. It provided up-to-date news, features and interviews with popstars, popular actors, and at the same time it addressed topics that teenage audiences were concerned with, including the transformations of puberty, body image, first sexual encounters, and first relationships<sup>317</sup>. This preoccupation with the young generation was also visible as far as TV programming was concerned, although again, it was mainly American shows that were brought over to model the teenage experience. Teenage drama *Beverly Hills 90210* was probably only just slightly less popular than *Dallas*, while at the same time being edgier and riskier, as it introduced topics which, until then, the Romanian society had not had to face, such as homosexuality, teen suicide, drugs,

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<sup>317</sup> A regular feature in magazines such as *Bravo* or *Popcorn*, including in their Romanian-language editions, is one in which two seemingly regular teenagers, male and female, are photographed fully naked, and are briefly interviewed about their bodies and about their sexual experience / partners. Such magazines, I believe, had a big impact on changing attitudes toward sex and sexual morality in Romania, by simply bringing talk of sexuality in the public sphere.

AIDS etc. There were also telenovelas aimed specifically at younger audiences (such as the Venezuelan *Paper Love / Amor de papel*, 1993), which added the extra dimension of class and class differences, something which the overwhelmingly poor Romanian youngsters could easily identify with.

Pro TV and the rest of the commercial TV stations launched in the 1990s were also responsible for the proliferation of the erotic thriller as an extremely popular genre in post-revolutionary Romania. Targeting adult audiences of both sexes, these were usually broadcast on a Friday and/or Saturday night, usually after 10pm. This trend began with more mainstream erotic thrillers, those of the “meisters of porno-noir”, in Linda Ruth Williams' classification<sup>318</sup>, i.e. films either written by Joe Eszterhas<sup>319</sup>, directed by Paul Verhoeven<sup>320</sup> or starring Michael Douglas<sup>321</sup> (or various combinations of the three). As with action films, several of these films were already available on the underground VHS network in the late '80s and early '90s, including some of their precursors, e.g. *Last Tango in Paris*, *Carnal Knowledge* (Mike Nichols, USA, 1971), or *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, USA, 1981), but it was TV that made them accessible to more mainstream levels. Once these more notable examples were all broadcast, the private TV stations moved on to acquire “lesser” versions, films that Linda Ruth Williams puts in the category of Direct-to-Video erotic thrillers, a sort of B category of the genre, closer to softcore pornography than to narrative cinema. These films are usually made on much lower budgets, and they do not feature big names, but can create

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318 Williams, Linda Ruth, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 2005.

319 Jagged Edge, Basic Instinct, Jade, Sliver, Showgirls.

320 Basic Instinct, Showgirls.

321 Fatal Attraction, Basic Instinct, Disclosure.

their own stars, like Canadian Shannon Tweed for example.

These erotic thrillers often bear provocative and erotically exciting titles, such as *Indecent Behaviour* (Lawrence Lanoff, USA, 1993), *Hard Vice* (Joey Travolta, USA, 1994) or *Victim of Desire* (Jim Wynorski, USA, 1995). These were initially translated almost word for word in Romania, and their popularity later gave birth to a mania of provocative translations of foreign film titles, even when these had no connection to the actual film or the actual subject matter. For example, *Sleepers* (Barry Levinson, USA, 1996) was translated as *Sins of Youth*; *The Wings of the Dove* (Iain Softley, USA / UK, 1997) was released as *Deceiving Passion*; *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh, USA, 1998) became *Dangerous Passion*. While this is of course a legitimate and fairly common marketing and promotional tool, it is worth noting that its overuse can lead to a desensitisation of audiences, and to words such as “passion”, “obsession”, or “desire” either losing or diminishing their meaning and impact. While this could have led to legitimising the use of these terms in the public sphere in the ‘90s, I wonder whether it inadvertently caused a de-legitimisation of debates on sex and sexuality, since the common view in Romanian society (including politics) is that one can (and should) only debate “serious” rather than “trivial” issues.

It is difficult to state for a fact the effect that erotic thrillers have had on Romanian viewers and on their attitudes to sex. On a speculative level though, as with the softcore erotic novels mentioned above, these films may facilitate access to sexual knowledge, and legitimise desire (primarily female, but it also encourages the expression of male desire), and it is not unlikely that they also facilitate a certain degree of empowerment,

as far as female viewers are concerned. Williams argues, for example, that while the sexually strong heroines of the DTV genre may function as traditional *objets de desir*, “they might equally offer a point of identification, desire or wish-fulfilment for women in the audience”<sup>322</sup>. While sexual desire has long been punished in narrative Western cinema (particularly in Hollywood), the DTV erotic thrillers are somewhat more progressive (though by no means radical, Williams argues), since, “good and bad, women and men, all want sex in the DTVs and all are equally applauded for it”<sup>323</sup>. Again, the extent to which the empowerment and liberation actually translates into attitudes and behaviours is yet to be investigated. However, in light of the contradictory social and moral behaviours that the Church insistently advocated, it is possible that they triggered reactions to sexuality comparable to schizoid trauma, perhaps doubled up by the duplicity of the traditionally conservative mentalities, and by the “doublethink” phenomenon characteristic of totalitarian socialist regimes.

#### **VIII.4. Sex and the Clinical Death of Romanian Cinema in the 1990s**

As far as Romanian film production was concerned, the tenth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was unique in that it was bookmarked by two years, 1990 and 2000, when no Romanian films were produced and released, neither in cinemas nor elsewhere. 1990 was marked by the reorganisation of the Romanian film production system, in line with all the other social and institutional changes. Private entrepreneurship entered the cinematic realm as it did all other industries. While this led to many important films being made and released throughout the decade, it failed to become reliable enough so as to make up a

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<sup>322</sup> Williams, *The Erotic Thriller...*, 342.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

strong, up-and-running, constantly producing industry.

Liberated by the constraints of censorship and of state subsidies, film criticism also turned its back on Romanian film production. The old *Cinema* magazine stopped publication within a few years after the fall of state socialism, and was later relaunched and rebranded as *The New Cinema / Noua Cinema*. However, cinephiles now tended to prefer *Pro Cinema*, a new film magazine that was part of the MediaPro trust. *Pro Cinema* was more dynamic than the old-fashioned *The New Cinema*, although at the same time it was much more focussed on foreign film production, particularly on Hollywood. Its first ever issue featured an exclusive interview with Sharon Stone, in which she frankly talked about men and sexuality, topics that *Pro Cinema* led with, fully aware of their appeal to the paying public.

Some Romanian films did manage to maintain and hold together Romania's cinematic profile abroad, via their official selection in many high-profile film festivals across Europe. *Luxury Hotel / Hotel de lux* (Dan Pita, Romania, 1992) won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival, while director Lucian Pintilie, whose films were censored by the communist regime, went to be nominated for the Palme d'Or, once in 1994 for *An Unforgettable Summer / Un ete inoubliable* (Romania / France), and again in 1996 for *Too Late / Prea tarziu* (Romania / France). However, the overall annual output of Romanian film studios was generally much lower than during state socialism (it tended to halve from 20-30 films per year to, maybe, 7-10 films, in a good year). As the economic situation worsened and corruption spread, the financial pressure on all industries supported by the government mounted, so that in 2000, the film industry

produced zero films. Due to this, the majority of Romanian critics refer to 2000 as being Year Zero of Romanian cinema, especially in light of the New Wave starting to gain momentum in the early 2000s, more on which in the next chapter.

Thematically, the post-communist landscape proved to be fertile terrain for most Romanian filmmakers of the decade. The new economic realities and the social changes these incurred, the open ways in which mainstream Western entertainment permeated the culture, the hope, confusion and disillusionment inherent in these social transformations – all these themes found a place in the Romanian cinema of the 1990s. Few Romanian films were made which did not look at the contemporary face of the country, with beggars, orphans, pimps and prostitutes made into stock characters, while the language, both verbal and cinematic, underwent a liberating transformation, and often led to excesses.

Several of these films, and especially those that openly discuss sexuality, had women at the centre. The relationship between Romanian cinema and female roles is, generally, an ambiguous one, that certainly deserves to be explored in all its complexity, which this study cannot afford to do. What I'd like to point out though, is that women are often lead characters in Romanian films of the socialist period (although purely female-centric films are rarely made). Credit needs to be given to the socialist system for enabling this predicament via its “equalising” ideology, although misogyny, female subservience, and female domesticity remain issues in hiding, and never addressed (perhaps not even to this day). This does not really change after 1990. What does change is the methods in which cinema explores women's specific issues and



predicaments, perhaps due to the ways in which these facilitate parallels with the dramatic challenges that the “motherland” is experiencing.

Rape, for example, is a central topic in two very successful films of the '90s, *The Oak / Balanta* (Lucian Pintilie, Romania / France, 1992) and *The Snails' Senator / Senatorul melcilor* (Mircea Daneliuc, Romania, 1996). In *The Oak*, set just after the 1989 Revolution, Nela (Maia Morgenstern) goes on a cross-country journey after the death of her father. She is raped on the outskirts of a small-town, and this traumatic event becomes an occasion for Pintilie to explore the facets of the dehumanisation of the Romanian people under communism. The event is nonchalantly ignored by the system. The policeman in charge of investigating the rape seems to care more about Nela having got into an argument with a sausage vendor, admonishing her: “You're lucky with this rape, otherwise...”. The rest of the community is equally dismissive of her trauma, and they put the entire blame on Nela. After she is taken to hospital, one of the other patients questions her: “Why did you not scream?”, betraying her secret belief that Nela had actually enjoyed the rape. Jealous of the connection that develops between Nela and one of the doctors, Mitica (Razvan Vasilescu), a nurse accuses Nela of having been had by all the men in town, an indication of the widespread belief that sex made public, be it rape or not, is a reflection on the woman's sexual promiscuity. The truth and the honesty of the relationship between Nela and Mitica is, overall, in clear contrast with the rest of the characters. They are made up to be exceptional characters in the post-1990 Romanian society, in which aberration has become norm. This is sealed by their exchange at the end of the film, when, talking about the possibility of having a baby together, Nela states that they could only produce either an idiot or a genius. Mitica,

triumphantly, agrees that “if the baby comes out normal, I'll kill them with my own hands”.

In *The Snails' Senator*, rape is also crucially linked to the plot. State senator Vartosu (Dorel Visan) visits a mountain village in order to inaugurate a modern windmill. While the villagers are out looking for snails for the senator's dinner, two men attempt to rape school teacher Ciresica (Cecilia Barbora). As in *The Oak*, both the community and the representative of the system (the senator) put most of the blame on the woman herself. They also attempt to keep the incident, on the one hand, hidden from the crew of Swiss filmmakers who follow the senator on his visit, and, on the other, off the public record: Cecilia is strongly encouraged to make up with her attackers and drop the charges, in exchange for the senator looking into solving a land dispute in her favour. Sexual violence is once more ridiculed and, according to the senator himself, representative of the Romanian state, merely something to be dealt with, the implacable destiny of the woman, rather than something to be appropriately condemned and punished. This eschewing of responsibility, characteristic of the whole post-socialist Romania not just the early years, is what Daneliuc seems to address, and it is almost unique to see it applied to matters of sexual agency and sexual morality.

I will now explore in more detail the ways in which two other films address the opportunities and the challenges offered by the fall of communism, as far as the treatment of sex and sexuality is concerned.

### **VIII.5. Sex and Desperation. The Bleakness of *The Conjugal Bed***

After the subversiveness of *Microphone Test* and *The Cruise* in the early 1980s, and the transition to a more metaphorical / metaphysical cinema by the end of that decade, Mircea Daneliuc makes one of the most important Romanian films of the 1990s, *The Conjugal Bed / Patul conjugal* (Romania, 1993). Through this (and with *The Snails' Senator* later on), Daneliuc explores the anguish and the absurdities of post-socialism in Romanian society. These would later become an obsession of his, almost stifling his creativity, which will never quite manage to reach the refinement of expression it has found in the 1980s and early '90s.

*The Conjugal Bed* follows Vasile (Gheorghe Dinica), the manager of a state-owned small cinema, as he tries to cope with the financial demands of his wife Carolina (Coca Bloos), whose pregnancy he wants terminated; with his frustrating affair with Stela (Lia Bugnar), the front-of-house at the cinema he managed; and with the unrelenting attempts made by a policeman (Valentin Teodosiu) to buy Vasile's valuable hardback, authored by Nicolae Ceausescu. I will next discuss the first two of these storylines and their relevance to my topic.

The film starts with a sex scene between a young man and a woman, that directly places sexuality in the turbulent context of the early '90s. Daneliuc films the reflection of the sexual act in a giant mirror, placed on the ceiling above the bed. Seconds later, it becomes apparent that this is part of Carolina's dream. Based on this unsettling dream, she tells Vasile that she has a bad feeling about her pregnancy (and it is not until the final scene of the film that this "bad feeling" is paid off, from a cinematic point of

view). Vasile quickly dismisses her and demands that she gets an abortion, a procedure now made legal, but the legality of which Vasile vigilantly perceives to be relative (“they’ll give another law on abortions one of these days”), as many pieces of legislation have in fact been since 1989.

There are two other important points that this scene makes. The first is that pregnancy, the result of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, continues to be perceived by men as the exclusive responsibility of women, illustrated by Vasile rhetorically asking Carolina “How on earth could you get pregnant?”. This remark is quickly followed by another, one which sheds some light on the ignorance of men (in this particular case, but of the population in general), as far as sexual and physiological matters are concerned – “You’re an old woman, it is disgraceful”. The second point comes from Carolina’s plea to Vasile to give her money for an abortion. She nonchalantly suggests that the money could come from him “spending less with that whore”, a proof that she is aware of his infidelity, and also proof that morality itself is unreliable and unstable, and that the marriage bond is not in fact binding, regardless of how hard the socialist ideology has tried to make it so.

This idea is also played with later in the film. After he finds out she has been going out with a German man, Vasile criticises his lover, Stela, for cheating on her husband. Again, this attitude is hypocritical: he wants to give the impression that he disagrees with infidelity, but in fact he only has a problem with the fact Stela’s infidelity is not exclusive to himself.

As far as the embodiment of Stela and Vasile's relationship goes, this is an affair completely devoid of passion, a merely physiological act. A few minutes into the film, when Vasile gets to his office, he and Stela engage in sexual intercourse. The scene is staged so as to suggest that the intercourse is almost part of their jobs, something they *have* to do rather than *want* to engage in. Stela nonchalantly takes off her panties, and sits on Vasile's desk with her legs wide open, and propped up some chairs. Meanwhile, Vasile carefully washes his hands. They do not make eye contact, and they do not touch each other until Vasile dries his hands, and goes to penetrate Stela. Their conversation during sex also lacks any relation to what they are doing: he asks her how much an abortion costs "these days", while she expresses her disbelief at him leaving "that wretched" pregnant wife. Vasile's telephone rings, and he picks up, engaging in a work-related conversation, as the intercourse continues, at least on Stela's part. The desire that she lacks in her contact with Vasile she now seems to find in the movie posters hanging in his office, which she looks at (and directs the viewer's gaze to), building up to an orgasm. Both the movie posters, which showcase the muscular action bodies of Jean-Claude van Damme and Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the overall scene itself, represent a brief commentary on the sexual aura that Western movie stars have for post-socialist Romanians, in stark contrast with the sexual potential (or the lack thereof) of bodies of men such as Vasile, which are often either professionalised or domesticised. This commentary is continued briefly into a minor scene, in which the cleaner working in the cinema listens to, and peeks through the curtains at, the film screening in the theatre. Daneliuc never indicates what film this is, but the diegetic noise coming from behind the curtain are of a woman engaged in sexual activity, likely to originate in an American erotic thriller rather than a Romanian film (although, as *The Conjugal Bed* itself

illustrates, sex has by now become visible in these films too).

Another important theme that Daneliuc explores in this film is the relationship between sexuality and economic status. On the one hand, there is Stela's predicament. She is not only married and involved in extra-marital affairs, but she also works as an escort for foreign businessmen visiting Bucharest, all done under her husband's supervision. She tells Vasile that she loves him, but that she is only “allowed” to love in exchange “for dollars”, an illustration of how, in post-socialism, sex has become an easy way to make money, be that via prostitution or pornography – after Vasile's stint in a psychiatric hospital, he returns to see his apartment rented out by Carolina as the location for a shooting of a porn film, in which Stela herself plays the lead. Another hint at the connection between politics, economy and sexuality is Stela's response when asked what her future plans are: either her husband will stand to be elected as senator in the Romanian Parliament, or “we'll go to Istanbul”. The latter points to the sex work characteristic of many post-communist countries, whereby young women often go abroad to countries like Turkey or Italy, in order to become exotic dancers, escorts or prostitutes.

On the other hand, Carolina's desire to get rid of her pregnancy is representative of the financial burden that a newly born baby could have on a family, particularly on a woman, during this decade. Carolina is seriously considering selling her baby for money, something which Vasile refuses to hear. He shouts at her that money is not what he needs, he needs “love and affection”. His plea seems rather sincere, particularly in light of his slow descent into madness, paralleled by a narrative and visual descent into

metaphor and surrealism. One such scene sees him and Stela in the cinema, as they kiss and fondle each other passionately. On screen is a montage of post-1990s commercials, intercut with scenes from the 1989 revolution, an expression of how the liberation from the socialist repression only leads to the commercialisation of feeling and of human relationships, rather than to desire expressed honestly, or even to love. Stela undresses and runs behind the screen, where she swings on a trapeze, with her legs wide open. Vasile climbs up a ladder, and he masturbates to Stela's shadow, intent on drilling a hole through the screen that stands between them, once more suggestive of the barriers imposed on desire, now made up of filmic images. A cut shows Stela escorted out of the cinema by two policemen, as Vasile turns to the camera and declares "It has been established that they were not real policemen, but miners in disguise"<sup>324</sup>. This also hints at the perversion of truth and of desire, previously attributed to the socialist ideology, now merely transferred to (and modified by) capitalism.

The post-communist reality voids sexuality of pleasure, and transforms it into an economic tool. In a scene in Stela's flat, Vasile looks at her body lying on a massage table, under a UV lamp. He tells her: "I know this body as well as I know my wife's. I look at you, Stela, and I wonder why I love you. I want to kiss you all over, across the length of your body, to bite you, hickies". He then breaks the fourth wall, and didactically explains: "This is a scenario, similar to the one with the Revolution, the terrorists, the elections, the miners. This is a working woman, ladies and gentlemen. Wake up, Stela, 'cause you'll be horrified when you find out how this scenario ends.

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<sup>324</sup> This is a reference to the Bucharest "Mineriads" of 1990 and 1991, when protesters against the communist links of the new regime are violently repressed by miners from the state-mines in the Jiu Valley, brought to Bucharest by train, to allegedly restore order.

And you have no future even if you stay and get a tan under this stupid thing”. In other words, Stela's lifestyle and choices are a “scenario” for happiness, in the same way the anti-communist revolution has been a “scenario” expected to change mentalities and bring happiness to the Romanian people. Stela turning her body into merchandise is not the way forward, but despite his love and desire, there is nothing that Vasile can offer her to change her fate. Financial gains thus trump love and the fulfilment of sexual desire, as far as post-communism is concerned.

While Vasile refuses to pay for a proper abortion for Carolina, he prefers that she attempts to induce one, through violent and dehumanising techniques. Perhaps one of the most memorable scenes in *The Conjugal Bed* is that of Carolina jumping off a wardrobe, in a desperate attempt to get rid of the foetus, riled up by Vasile's chants. Later in the film, Vasile himself tries to kill the baby, by repeatedly stabbing Carolina in the stomach, before literally putting a nail through her head. It is not always clear whether these scenes are actually part of the plot, or whether they are just one of Vasile's “scenarios”. Either way, they have devastating consequences: the final scene follows Stela, 20 years later, in a no-man's-land Bucharest, as she arrives poor and hungry at a flat. The flat turns out to be Vasile and Carolina's old apartment. The young man that Stela follows there for food seems to have mental disabilities, and indeed there is every clue that he is Carolina and Vasile's son, presumably born with reduced intellectual abilities. The final image is cyclical, and a visual repetition of Carolina's dream at the beginning of the film, now turned real. Stela and the young man have sex on the bed, with Ceausescu's hardback under them, and a large mirror above. Their characters are reduced to their bodies, from which all desire, all feelings, and all



humanity have been removed, like ghosts haunting the ruins of a castle once full of possibilities.

### **VIII.6. Sex and the Single Girl. Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk in *Love and Hot Water***

One of the most neglected Romanian films of the decade was 1992's *Love and Hot Water / Dragoste si apa calda*, written by Cristian Dumitru and Loredana Soradi, and directed by Dan Mironescu. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was produced by one of the newly created private enterprises, Alpha Films International, in which Mircea Daneliuc played a managerial role, and which would later also be involved in producing Daneliuc's own *Snails' Senator*. The general critical response to *Love and Hot Water* was lukewarm, mostly because it is a rather unequal film, and often ambiguous in what it has to say. The public didn't see much of it either. Since it does not feature any big acting names, it did not really find a way to reach many Romanian screens, particularly as Hollywood blockbusters were in high demand. *Love and Hot Water* was, however, an important film as far as the debate on sex and sexuality is concerned, as it puts female desire at its centre, and it gives it legitimacy, if not always the chance to arrive at a happy ending.

While constantly entertaining, the film does not really have a plot as such. It follows the friendships and relationships that develop within a group of young women who work together in a factory, and who also live together in a communal residence, as each of them searches for erotic accomplishment with various men. Two characters stand out from the group, those of Angela (Liliana Pana) and Dorina (Magda Catone), who both

fall under the spell of Titi (Mihai Bica), a small businessman. Additionally, Angela has two other romantic interests: Emil (Florin Zamfirescu), who also tries to become an entrepreneur (although by more legal means), and Radu (Petre Nicolae), an immigrant to Australia who temporarily returns to Bucharest, in order to find a Romanian wife.

The most important accomplishment of the film is the air of liberation it gives to the post-communist erotic landscape in general, and the female freedom to search for accomplished desire in particular. Tonally, the film is reminiscent of the nonchalance of, say, Makavejev's films, but it is ostensibly less radical and less conceptual. To an extent, it is much closer – in spirit rather than aesthetic – to Pedro Almodovar's female-centric films (from this point of view, it would have been extremely interesting to see what Mironescu's career would have looked like had he continued directing). The impression of liberation is given by the ways in which the film deals with, firstly, nudity, then with language, then with sexual intercourse, and finally with the characters' honest approach to erotic relationships.

In a very brief scene, the female co-workers are filmed having a shower together, in the communal shower room. Whereas other Romanian films of the period use nudity simply because it is now permitted, it is not without a purpose here. The women joke with each other and tease each other, a playfulness which suggests they are entirely comfortable in their own bodies. These bodies are no longer oppressively regulated by the state, and not yet (pseudo-) regulated by women's media (at least not by visual media, e.g. magazines and TV shows). This image of nudity is opposed to another “shower in the workplace” scene, present in Lucian Pintilie's *Too Late*, and suggestive of the atrophy of

the masculine body in post-socialism. There, the attempt to identify of a killer brings the male mine workers lined up naked in the shower, and the camera slides over their static bodies, highlighting their ash-coloured lifelessness, like that of slabs of rock. In *Love and Hot Water*, the female bodies are dynamic, almost restless, always in action, and almost communicating with each other. Their evident comfort with their shared nakedness suggests a female camaraderie and solidarity that is in stark contrast to the declaratively “communist”, but ultimately individualistic and secretive lives in state socialism.

The liberalisation of attitudes toward sex and sexuality is also evident in the ways in which characters use language. It is equally important that women *talk* about sex (inconceivable of any character in socialist cinema), but also that it is *women*, rather than men, who talk about sex. This seldom happens in Romanian cinema, and certainly not until *Child's Pose / Pozitia copilului* (Calin Peter Netzer, Romania, 2013) would female characters talk about sex as frankly as they do in *Love and Hot Water*. It is true, they may not be talking about something other than men<sup>325</sup> too often, but looking beyond this rigid criterion, their own desire is an intrinsic component of the conversation. Monique Wittig says that language “relates to an important political field where what is at play is power, or more than that, a network of powers, since there is a multiplicity of languages that constantly act upon the social reality”<sup>326</sup>. There is also something to do with power, specifically sexual power, in how the women characters use language in the film. These are women who are knowledgeable in the “men” area and know what men usually like – “you've got tits, you've got ass, do you think they're

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<sup>325</sup> As per the Bechdel test.

<sup>326</sup> Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 21.

going to look at your earrings?”, Dorina says to another girl. They also know what they like themselves, and they are comfortable enough in this knowledge so as to make sexual innuendo: the same Dorina suggests that a woman is lucky if she ends up dating a guy “with two zippers up the front”, a playful way to hint at the fact that she finds a big penis on a man desirable. Going through the personal ads in the paper is another opportunity for the women to joke about sex and dating, although the specific joke is less effective when translated, as it is actually a play on words. The Romanian words for language and tongue are the same (*limbă*), so that when Dorina asks Angela whether she knows any languages, and Angela answers “What do you think?”, Dorina promptly declares that “I think the first one is the hardest, after that you get used to it”. At the same time, their hobby of reading through the personal ads reflects something that actually happens in society at the time, which is foreign businessmen putting ads in the paper looking for young Romanian ladies, “good around the house”, presumably for marriage, but more often than not just for sex.

There is something refreshing in the way these women search for erotic opportunities, but at the same time it is difficult not to notice how inextricably linked this erotic accomplishment is with the possibility of overcoming (i.e. improving) their socio-economic status. While, outside the factory, they look and behave differently to what women would have done under communism, the reality is that it is a *factory* that employs them. With state factories largely unproductive and profitless, the employees' economic sense of security in the “new world” diminishes, particularly in light of the colourful opportunities brought about by capitalism. Emil echoes this way of thinking by shouting “Money, not the factory!”, when asking Angela to become both his wife

and his business partner. Dorina's attraction to Titi is not just sexual, but financial too, so that her decision to marry him is largely based on her “need to be rid of this factory”, by becoming Titi's business associate in his small convenience store. Capitalism and entrepreneurship are therefore extremely appealing, and if not eroticised, they are at least seen as opportunities for emancipation.

One final aspect of the liberated attitude toward sexuality is the way in which both the characters, and the filmmakers, approach the sexual act. The temptation to make a caricature of it, or to “pornographise” it, is popular with many Romanian directors of the decade, but *Love and Hot Water* rarely falls into that trap. While the sexual innuendo is often crass (especially when it comes from the male characters), sexual intercourse is depicted as pure enjoyment, where both the man and the woman are givers, as well as receivers of pleasure. The camera does not shy away from the naked bodies at all, but it avoids making a show of the genital landscape, which is the terrain of pornography. This is valid for both Dorina and Titi's first encounter, and for Angela and Titi's, when they take advantage of Dorina being away and engage in sex.

However, Angela's post-coital ecstasy is brutally put to an end by Titi, who brings in one of his teenage neighbours (a character very similar to Carolina and Vasile's son in the epilogue to *The Conjugal Bed*), who then rapes Angela. While a common reading of this can be that female desire and its expression are cinematically punished, I prefer to look at it more in context. Sexual violence is an extremely important issue for Romanian women, and for Eastern Europe in general. While it is not created by the fall of communism, it is certainly brought into view after this. In this context, Mironescu

merely brings forth one of the downsides of the emancipation of sexual desire: that exposing oneself to, and engaging in the search for, sexual fulfilment means exposing oneself to everything out there, including violence. Clearly, not engaging in this search is not the solution, and *Love and Hot Water* avoids this type of verdict. What it seems to do is simply conclude that it could be a traumatic process. In the final scene of the film, in the aftermath of her rape, Angela walks past an electronics shop, and stops to look at the TVs displayed in the window. The footage on the TV screen is of a stray dog (another visual staple of post-communist Romania). Angela is likened to that stray dog: she is free, but abandoned. Like Angela, the audience is left to ponder the opportunities, but also the trauma of post-communism.

## **VIII.7. Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the challenges brought forth by post-socialism in 1990s Romania, particularly in regards to the increasing visibility of sex and sexuality in films, media and the society as a whole. I have argued that the transition process has democratised and legitimised sexual desire, but have also shown that de-regulation did not necessarily mean immediate attitudinal progress.

The chapter has also looked in detail at the challenges of representing sex and sexuality in Romanian films, in the context in which these competed with more channels of visibility, as well as with the popularity of film and television imports. By focussing on Mircea Daneliuc's *The Conjugal Bed*, I argue that the economic and sexual liberation brought by the transition to democracy was a disorienting and alienating process, in which the individual's need for the fulfilment of genuine desire could be crushed as

effectively as it was under socialism. As evident in the film, the post-communist confusion between what was public and what was private also led to a loss of meaning as far as sex and sexuality were concerned, in the absence (or in the multiplication?) of sites of power to assign and contest meaning. My analysis of *Love and Hot Water* has pointed out the feminist qualities of this underrated film, which showed that women could have ownership of their erotic desires and of their own bodies, and these could be celebrated during the tumultuous and traumatic transition years.

## **Chapter IX: Out of the Dark: Cinema, Sexuality and the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

After another brief political crisis at the turn of the century, Romania has begun to find its feet on its path toward development and out of transition. While progress continues to be relatively slow, it has also been more visible than before, with more liberal attitudes to sexuality now manifesting alongside regressive ones. One part of society where democratisation is in full swing is entertainment and media consumption – and the big winners in this are Hollywood and the mainstream American television industry yet again. Attitudes to sex and sexuality are primarily influenced by these models, although they do not seem to be as effective when it comes to the budding visibility of non-normative sexualities, which in the specific Romanian context (as more widely in the Eastern European one) become less straightforward to look at. I will examine these queer perspectives during the course of this final chapter, and I propose intersectionality as an analytical tool, or a “way in” toward understanding the complexity (and the importance) that sexualities gain in a non-Western context.

### **IX.1. Back to Square '90 – One Step Forward, One Step Back**

The year 2000 marked a crisis in Romania's transition to democracy. The government elected in 1996 had struggled to implement reformist policies, and just two years after winning the election, in 1998, the government collapsed due to frictions in the coalition parties. The coalition was incapable to convincingly kickstart the reform, particularly in the economic sector, which struggled to stay afloat. The image of the ruling coalition



was also negatively impacted by the fact that it had supported NATO's decision to intervene in the conflict in neighbouring Serbia (which Romanians perceived to be friends, as former members of the Eastern Bloc).

It was under the rule of this malfunctioning coalition that Romania was invited, in 1999, to begin the process of joining the European Union structures. However, this had little impact on voters in the 2000 parliamentary election, in which the main governing party barely managed to get 10% of the votes. The majority of votes went toward Ion Iliescu's party – Partidul Democratiei Sociale din Romania (PDSR, the Romanian Party of Social Democracy) – which gathered former members of the nomenklatura, as well as various businessmen of ill repute.

The presidential election of the same year represented the actual peak of the political crisis. In the second round, former president Ion Iliescu was pitted against Corneliu Vadim Tudor, leader of the far-right organisation Partidul Romania Mare (PRM, the Great Romania Party). Tudor was a former poet, famous for having been part of the entourage of socialist leader Nicolae Ceausescu before 1989, now turned into a staunch nationalist, xenophobe and extremely vocal supporter of the traditional Christian Orthodox values (his party, while less violent, strongly resonated with the values supported by the 1930s far-right Iron Guard). The liberals and the progressives found themselves in a conundrum, and were eventually pushed to cast their vote for Iliescu, the lesser of two evils, after having voted against him in 1996 due to his association to the old socialist structures.

Nevertheless, all was not lost for progressives. As covered in more detail in the previous chapter, during the 1990s Romania had started a lengthy and difficult negotiation process regarding its accession to Western European structures, which has become probably the most successful project impacting Romanian society since the fall of communism. Romania joined NATO in 2004, and finally also the European Union, on 1 January 2007. As a reminder, it was as part of this process that the Romanian legislation began to change in terms of granting rights to sexual minorities, culminating with the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2001, in parallel with the emergence of organisations advocating LGBT+ rights, such as ACCEPT.

However, as in other countries from the former Eastern Bloc, changes in legislation did not automatically lead to changes in public attitudes toward non-normative sexualities, for a variety of reasons, discussed in the next section. At the same time, even after liberals and progressives became more successful in the public arena, once the Liberal Democrats win the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2004 (when centrist Traian Basescu became president, a function he held until 2014), the topic of the rights of sexual minorities was left buried. In the public discourse concerning Romania, both within and outside the country, the priorities became the fight against corruption, the independence of the judicial system, and the economic development. That is, at least until very recently, when debates on gay marriage and ‘non-traditional’ families have begun to emerge, prompted both by Western developments, and by manifest tensions between Western and Eastern Europe.

## **IX.2. From Sexuality to Sexualities. Socio-Economic Attitudes**

The fall of state socialism in 1989 left Romanians poor and confused, lacking in true political engagement, and vulnerable to empty promises. After being semi-tolerated during socialism, the Christian Orthodox Church re-surfaced, still extremely traditionalist. Since the 1990s, the Romanian Orthodox Church has promoted and encouraged autarchic and sectarian tendencies, which safely look inward and back, rather than outward and to the future. As previously shown, the Church has been on the frontline of the battle against equal rights, and it showed contempt and discontent when homosexuality was decriminalised in 2001.

According to a 2016 survey, the vast majority of Romanians also tend to express homophobic views: more than 70% of respondents said they would not like to have a gay person as a neighbour. It should be mentioned that Romanians, in their majority, also exhibit racist and xenophobic tendencies. According to the same survey, 60% would not want a Muslim as a neighbour, and 51% would not want a Roma ethnic living next door. Pride marches (or Marches for Diversity, as they are commonly known in Romania) have been slowly gaining traction, but local councils regularly allow protest marches to take place on the same day, the same time, and often the same location. These counter-marches are usually organised by the extreme right organisation The New Right (Noua Dreapta), and they give their supporters the opportunity to shout virulent slogans attacking the LGBT+ community.

Same-sex relationships are still taboo, and unlike many EU countries, they are not officially recognised in the form of a civil union, or even marriage. Not only that, but in

2015, an organisation called Coalitia pentru Familie / The Coalition for Family is formed, whose aim is for the state constitution to be changed so that gay marriage would not be allowed, by definitively enshrining marriage as being the union between a man and a woman. The CpF has gained so much support that it has managed to push for a proposal to organise a national referendum on this precise topic, of “defining” the family. The former leader of the ruling party, social-democrat Liviu Dragnea, was a staunch supporter of this initiative, which failed to produce any results. The referendum was boycotted by the majority of the population, not necessarily because they supported equal rights for sexual minorities, but rather as a form of protest against Dragnea, formally put under corruption charges by the Romanian courts.

Another phenomenon that’s worth a brief mention is the increasing numbers of Romanians engaged with sex work. In the early part of the noughties, most sex workers in the European Union came from Russia and Ukraine<sup>327</sup>. Once countries from the Eastern Bloc formally joined the structures, the statistics changed dramatically. Romanians and Bulgarians made up almost a fifth of the total number of prostitutes working in the EU (12% Romanians, 7% Bulgarians), followed by sex workers from Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic countries. This was undoubtedly favoured by the freedom of work and movement, as well as by the prolonged poverty and general lack of prospects for many young men and women from these countries.

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<sup>327</sup> Rettman, Andrew. “Romanian sex workers most prevalent in EU”.  
<https://euobserver.com/social/29340>. May, 15, 2017.

### **IX.3. The Multiplication and Diversification of Visual Media**

In line with the rest of Europe (and indeed the rest of the world), beginning with the late 1990s, there has been a visible increase in the types of audiovisual content consumed by Romanians, facilitated by an increase in the types of channels that make this content available.

Firstly, the previously state-owned network of cinemas was gradually pushed out of the film distribution market by the availability of multiplex cinemas, an entirely foreign concept to Romanians up until the early noughties. They have been perceived, on the one hand, as a sign of development. Due to insufficient funding and investments in modernisation, the state-owned cinemas have limited operating hours, uncomfortable seating and insufficient heating, old projection machines, and the variety of films on offer is relatively limited. As Hollywood became, during the 1990s, the symbol of progress as far as tastes in cinema are concerned, the fact that Romaniafilm distributes mainly European and Romanian films is perceived to be old-fashioned by the vast majority of filmgoers, who avoid these films and, implicitly, the venues in which they are screened. In opposition, multiplex cinemas are much more focussed on the physical comfort of the audience, offering bigger and softer seats, a higher definition quality of projection, better sound, heating, as well as foods and drinks for purchase and consumption during the screening. In this context, even when Romaniafilm shows Hollywood films, it is not surprising the audiences do not choose to pay for a ticket in one of their cinemas, even though – or, perhaps, precisely because – they are much cheaper than tickets at a multiplex. I stress the potential causality, as multiplex cinemas are also perceived as a sign of status – it is mainly the increasing middle class that can

generally afford the ticket price at these venues.

As far as television is concerned, a significant development for the film market has been the expansion of American channel Home Box Office (HBO) in Eastern Europe more widely, and in Romania specifically, since the early 2000s. Marketed under the now famous slogan “Cinema la tine acasa” (“Cinema at your home”), HBO Romania has been offering very recent films and television shows, uninterrupted by advertising. Initially, due to the fact that it operates on a pay-per-view basis, its reach was quite limited, due to which its audience consisted mainly of better-off, often better educated, viewers. Gradually though, with the increased diversification of the bundles offered by the major television providers, its availability expanded. While still part of “extra” bundles, it is now much more affordable to urban audiences, including working class. In addition to HBO Romania, which now also offers a streaming service available on a subscription basis, a wide variety of channels offering exclusively motion picture content has become available, both through television providers and via satellite, e.g. Paramount Pictures, TCM, AXN, TV1000, Hallmark, as well as channels with a more global outreach, such as Bollywood or Bollywood TV. Due to this, film content has become less available in the offer of traditional TV stations, both private and state-controlled. Still one of the major private TV stations, ProTV is now widely perceived as being the “rerun” station as far as films are concerned, as the original content on offer is mainly non-fiction or reality TV. Acasa TV, its sister station, continues to broadcast mainly soap operas and telenovelas, but the offer has expanded to include Chinese and Turkish soap operas, in addition to South American ones. The public television rarely broadcasts films, mainly due to prolonged management and financial difficulties, which

make it more difficult to purchase international productions. TVR2, the secondary public station, does, on the other hand, regularly broadcast Romanian films from the National Film Archive, some of them very seldom accessible elsewhere. Unfortunately, in terms of their availability online, TVR2 is still behind the times.

Perhaps the biggest development of recent decades in terms of audiovisual content accessibility is the widespread availability of the internet, as least as far as urban areas are concerned (there is still little availability in rural areas). The content boom, coupled with a lack of regulation (more manifest in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century rather than the present decade), provides access to Western films and TV shows, not necessarily unavailable on traditional channels, but which would take years to reach these traditional channels. Piracy has flourished in Romania since the early 2000s, and despite attempts to legislate against this, file-share (or torrent) sites, where users can both upload and download content without the permission of copyright holders, are still widely accessible across the country. In recent years though, providers of “legal” audiovisual content, such as Netflix, have also started operating in Romania, and while many users continue to use pirate methods to access films, TV and music online, it is interesting to see whether this phenomenon could be curbed by the expansion of legitimate streaming-content providers in the next few years.

In terms of film production, this is still largely dependent on state-funding. However, changes in membership of the main funding body, coupled with the determination of a new generation of filmmakers, have facilitated the birth of the so-called Romanian New Wave, which has dominated Romanian cinema for the last decade. Some of the

directors associated with it are Cristi Puiu<sup>328</sup>, Cristian Mungiu<sup>329</sup>, Corneliu Porumboiu<sup>330</sup> and the late Cristian Nemescu<sup>331</sup>. In fact, while their films are grouped under the “new wave” label, they are continuing the tradition of brutal realism and moral concerns of Pintilie and Daneliuc, while refining it, polishing it, and adapting it to the socio-political realities of contemporary Romania. It is also worth pointing out that, while extremely successful in film festivals, both home and abroad, these films rarely smash the Romanian box-office, as audiences, as elsewhere nowadays, tend to prefer Hollywood cinema.

#### **IX.4. Traumas of the Past: Revisiting Lives under the Anti-abortion**

##### ***Decree in 4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days***

The first (and, to date, the only) Romanian film ever to win the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival is Cristian Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, one of the peak films that the Romanian New Wave has produced. The film looks at the bleak period of the anti-abortion decree in the late 1980s. Perhaps together with the slightly more light-hearted documentary film *Children of the Decree / Decreteii* (Florin Iepan, Romania, 2005), has contributed to introducing on the public agenda the necessity of revisiting the traumatic past, and of talking about it honestly and responsibly.

The film is the story of Bucharest students Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) and Gabita

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<sup>328</sup> *Stuff and Dough / Marfa si banii* (Romania, 2001); *The Death of Mr Lazarescu / Moartea domnului Lazarescu* (Romania, 2005).

<sup>329</sup> *4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile; Beyond the Hills; Graduation / Bacalaureat* (Romania / France / Belgium, 2016).

<sup>330</sup> *12:08 East of Bucharest; Police, Adjective / Politist, adjectiv* (Romania, 2009).

<sup>331</sup> *California Dreamin’* (Romania, 2007).



(Laura Vasiliu), her colleague and roommate, which Otilia accompanies when she undergoes an illegal abortion procedure. The abortion is performed by a man nicknamed Mr Bebe (Vlad Ivanov) in a hotel room, where he also asks the girls for sexual favours. Using a minimalist, realist style, Mungiu's film emotionally resonates with the great traditions in Eastern European cinema, in its depiction of the complexities of the individual trapped by political and social constraints within a particular historical period.

Facilitated by a distance from the period in which the characters' experiences take place, Mungiu casts a more complex look at the causes, the risks and the implications that illegal abortions had, than perhaps Andrei Blaier has managed to do in his *Postcards with Wildflowers*, discussed in an earlier chapter. Whereas Blaier's heroine does not survive the abortion, and the guilty witness kills herself, Mungiu's protagonists have to live with the traumatic consequences of not just the act of abortion, but also of the abuse suffered at the hands of the self-proclaimed helper.

Through Mr Bebe's character, Mungiu shows the often unseen side of social interdictions and taboo practices, which is that there is always someone who profits from these practices, at the expense of those who want to evade them. Mr Bebe is a stranger to the girls up until the point they meet, but this does not prevent him from taking advantage of the vulnerable situation in which they both are, essentially not giving them an option to escape. He virtually blackmails them into having sex with him, but this is not straightforward blackmail: he acts like he gives the girls the choice (and the responsibility) to consent or not to his offer, which makes their predicament even

more traumatic. Mr Bebe could threaten them with trading them in to the authorities, on the grounds of pursuing illegal methods to get an abortion, but instead he puts them in a situation where he refuses to interrupt the pregnancy (which is more advanced than the girls initially thought). He makes this even more oppressively difficult for Otilia, as he does not just want to sleep with pregnant Gabita, but with Otilia too, which should be the last to feel any obligation toward her roommate. The fact that Otilia does accept in the end goes to show her moral superiority, but it is also a dramatic illustration of how a system designed to strictly regulate bodies and sexual desire can affect all bodies, not just those manifesting desire.

The film is particularly effective in highlighting the ignorance that the society at large has had toward the issue of illegal abortion in communist Romania, which Mungiu equates to a complicity to oppression. The traumatic rape episode happens within the first half of the film. After this, the focus of the action moves onto Otilia, who had agreed to attend her boyfriend's mother's birthday party, and who now must do so bearing the burden of the trauma she has just experienced. Once she arrives at her boyfriend Adi's flat, Otilia is seated at the dinner table, where Adi's parents and their friends make small talk, and reminisce their youth. Filmed in a long, static, wide-angle sequence, Otilia becomes more and more withdrawn from the conversation, an opportunity for Mungiu to highlight the disconnect between the traumatic effects that the regime has inflicted on Otilia's generation and the middle-class preoccupations of the older generation, which give little indication of being aware of the repressive system they live in. The scene goes on for a few good minutes, during which the older characters talk incessantly, almost as if they fear silence, as silence would be an

opportunity for the truth to emerge.

Otilia also seems to be disconnected from her boyfriend, and her inability to confess the trauma inflicted on her sexual integrity only goes to show the impossibility of building honest, healthy romantic relationships within the constraints of the socialist state. The scene immediately following the dinner party sees Otilia and Adi having a conversation in Adi's room, where Otilia attempts to hint at the truth, and to get to the essence of the sexual politics, something which Adi is completely oblivious to. When she worryingly asks Adi what they would do if she was pregnant, he tries to dismiss her by changing the subject. When Otilia blames him for not having "finished outside" (alluding to the contraceptive function of *coitus interruptus*, commonly used at the time), he admonishes her for "talking about these things". The tension between talking about sex and sexuality, and keeping them as hidden practices and behaviours, has been so damaging to generations of Romanians that young adults such as Adi, presumably more open than his parents' generation, are formatted to lean toward the latter. In a reparative act, Mungiu goes to dismantle this tension, by making Otilia come back with a (logically infallible) argument: "You mean, you're not embarrassed to do these things, but you're embarrassed to talk about them?".

The young woman is left even more alone in her confrontation with an oblivious society, as ultimately, Adi's solution to Otilia's dilemma is for him to marry her, if she were indeed pregnant. This is a fake resolution, of course, as it avoids the actual problem, that of the woman's right and ability to have control over her own body.

Otilia's disappointment is even more poignant, given that she has just come out of an

experience where she had to cede control of her body to the oppressive desires of another man. Her retort is curt: “Don’t worry, I don’t want to spend the rest of my life making mashed potatoes for you!”. This could be read as a feminist stance if it wasn’t so profoundly a response to trauma and a reflection of the inability to process it.

Mungiu’s attempt to get to the truth of the experience is also manifest in the way in which he places not just the characters under aggression, but the audience too. The scene in which Otilia returns to the hotel room, in which Gabita rests after the abortion, has become emblematic for its graphic depiction of the aborted fetus lying on the bathroom floor. Another static shot encompasses the fetus in its entirety, and Mungiu holds the camera on it for a good minute, which some critics and viewers perceived to be extremely long, due to how uncomfortable looking at it can feel. What Mungiu successfully suggests is that, regardless of how painful it might be to look at the aborted fetus, it is a long way from the pain of the experience that has led to this.

As Gabita is too weak to perform it, Otilia is finally given one last task – that of getting rid of the fetus. Gabita insists that Otilia buries it, something which Otilia does not respond to, knowing she would not have where or how, or indeed the time to do this (the eyes of the state could be watching from anywhere). Instead, she gets rid of it the way Mr Bebe had advised them to: by throwing it down a garbage disposal tower, in a randomly chosen tenement building. The scene is effective at highlighting the dangers of this act, and the risks to which Otilia, already traumatised, is forced to further expose herself. While threatened by all the movements and diegetic sounds of the streets, particularly by that of a police car, she ultimately acquits herself of her task.

Returning to the hotel restaurant, Otilia is joined by Gabita for dinner. When Gabita asks whether she has buried the foetus, Otilia firmly refuses to answer: “You know what we’re going to do? We’re never going to talk about this again.”. Silence falls between the two, as the camera pans out, suggesting that if they can’t talk about this, then they can’t talk about anything. This ending acts in both a reparative manner, and a critical one, directed at latter generations and at the cacophony of the post-communist public discourse. The film unearths the hidden traumas and histories of less overt sexual abuse, but, with Otilia looking outside the restaurant window and almost into the camera, viewers are confronted with the prospect of taking responsibility for having inflicted or perpetuated these traumas, either through ignorance, or through keeping the topic out of public debate. It is not so much that if they couldn’t talk about it, they wouldn’t talk of anything, but rather that if they couldn’t talk about it, they would have to talk about everything else.

### **IX.5. Traumas of the Present: Sex Work, Displacing Bodies, Displacing Identities in *The Italian Girls***

The problematic, but relatively widespread, phenomenon of migrant sex work does get a cinematic treatment in Romanian films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the most interesting perspective on it is that put forward by first-time director Napoleon Helmis (currently working as Nap Toader). In his 2004 film *Italiencele / The Italian Girls*, he examines the impact that sex work has on both those who practice it, and on the ways in which the wider community is affected by it. In a similar manner to the all-encompassing view of causes, manifestations and consequences of a sexually-related social constraint or taboo

that *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* has put forward, Helmis takes a similar approach with his film, although his perspective is arguably less aesthetically accomplished than Cristian Mungiu's.

*The Italian Girls* also focusses on two female characters, sisters Jeni (Mara Nicolescu) and Lenuta (Ana Ularu), who live with their father in a small rural community in the south-east of Romania, and who dream about leaving their poverty-ridden existence behind, for a bright and rich future in Western Europe. Having been tricked into leaving the country by the promise of seasonal agriculture work, the girls return to their village a year later, bearing the trauma of having been forced into sex work and pornography.

The theme of migration is announced quite literally as soon as the film starts. As the camera tilts down on a seemingly idyllic village, a megaphone from a car driving down the main road announces the villagers that the local club will host an event to select applicants for work abroad, i.e. for picking olives in Greece, strawberries in Spain, or oranges in Italy. Strawberry picking in Spain is Jeni's dream. She has a Romanian lover nicknamed Giovanni who has promised her he would take her to Spain without having to go through a selection process. This would be more financially profitable than finding a job in Romania, as she would be paid 1,500 euros a month, instead of 50 lei (at the time around 10 euros) a month, which is the financial support given by the state to the unemployed. Further developing on the context, Jeni teaches her slightly younger sister that money is what rules everything, and that education is no longer something that would increase her chances to be successful in life (for example, Jeni says, "all the dumb girls in my class have succeeded"). By contrast, Lenuta does not seem to want

money, but romance (same as Vasile, in *The Conjugal Bed*). Her desires are transnational – she regularly dreams of marrying an American soldier (something which would become the plot of another Romanian New Wave film, Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin'*, and which is proof that fantasies of romantic accomplishment with foreigners are certainly common in the Romanian society of the early 2000s).

Giovanni does indeed want to take Jeni and Lenuta abroad, and for this he enlists the help of an alleged former school friend, Fane, who is meant to be the intermediary between the girls and their elusive Spanish employer. That Giovanni might have a clue as to the type of work the girls would actually do abroad can be seen in the way that he and Fane joke about Lenuta during a phone conversation. Lenuta and Fane had not met before, but he is extremely curious about what she looks like. Lenuta thinks she looks like “Claudia Fischer” (most likely the model Claudia Schiffer), but Giovanni exaggerates her appeal when “selling” her to Fane, assuring him that Lenuta is in the category “Pamela Anderson and above”, even though she is far from resembling the *Baywatch* actress. What this exchange suggests is that, since Lenuta is attractive enough for at least one of the men, she would be able to make money by using her body. Once more, female bodies are under men's control, who shape and understand them according to their own fantasies and desires, be those erotic or financial.

The two men and two women go through various adventures on their way to the border, which include drugs consumption, encounters with the police, and a rest stop at a monastery. All of these are comments on the socio-economic situation of early 2000s Romania. Firstly, Giovanni has to sneak the two sisters out of the family home without

the father noticing they had gone. This is an alcoholic and abusive father, who beats the two girls “when they get up and when they go to sleep”, according to Giovanni. This reflects a widespread problem, which Romania has had for decades, that of domestic violence, and particularly of violence against women and children. Deep-rooted corruption and the disregard for law and order – themselves endemic problems even today, particularly at the higher levels of society, but also in the smallest day-to-day interactions between people – are also commented upon, for example in the scene where the four “adventurers” are stopped by a policeman, who Fane initially tries to bribe, then threatens him with a gun. Acquaintances trump the law though, as it is ultimately the recognition that Fane and the policeman know each other from when they were children which lets the outlaws off the hook.

Helmis avoids going into detail regarding the girls’ life abroad, instead opting for an ellipsis that advances the plot to approximately one year later. This ambiguity regarding the girls’ activity outside the country is significant, as it mirrors the perception which the Romanian masses have in respect to young women working abroad. Suspicions of prostitution, or of other types of sex work, surround a lot of young Romanians working abroad, however earnestly their time is actually spent. This second act begins with Jeni and Lenuta returning to the village, seemingly wild and free, riding on their motorcycle. Non-diegetically, in voiceover, Jeni is reading a letter to their father. In it, she explains that they had not got to Spain, but instead stopped to work as grape-pickers in Italy. She promises that they would only try to make a bit more money before returning home, and conveys the news that Lenuta had met her American soldier at a NATO base nearby. As it turns out later in the film, this letter is a fantasy, but Helmis uses it dramatically to



highlight the girls' inability to cope with the trauma of being sold into forced labour, as sex workers. Lenuta takes the fantasy even further, literally rewriting her story. She tells Jeni that she is writing a diary entry about how glad she is that they have got home safely, and about how much she misses her American soldier. Jeni is quick to break the spell, hinting for the first time at the web of lies they had made for themselves, in order to alleviate the pain: "Which soldier? Christopher Walken<sup>332</sup>, Ken Russell<sup>333</sup>, or Ben Affleck<sup>334</sup>?"

As with *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, one can also read some feminist undertones in the sisters' return to the village. They seem more confident and empowered, and they do not hesitate to stand up to men who had either taken advantage of them in the past, or who attack them in the middle of the night. When Giovanni, has also returned to the village in the mean time, attends Jeni's father's funeral, Jeni assaults him and blames him for having had deserted her and her sister a year earlier. When masked men enter their home and demand that they keep their mouths shut about their experience (still undisclosed at this point), Jeni yells that they should not touch them, as they have AIDS. By the next day, the whole village ends up knowing this, and they use it as an insult against the girls. Additionally, Jeni launches her candidacy for mayor, as a direct competitor to Giovanni. In a brief speech held in front of a group of older women, she sounds like a feminist activist too, encouraging their emancipation: "Choose a woman!"

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<sup>332</sup> Possibly a reference to his role in *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, USA / UK, 1978).

<sup>333</sup> Presumably, she means American actor Kurt Russell, possibly in reference to his leading role in *Soldier* (Paul W.S. Anderson, UK / USA, 1998). This may well be a joke between the writer-director Helmis and the more film-educated viewers, who will be aware that Ken Russell is the British director known for *Women in Love* (UK, 1969) and *The Devils* (UK, 1971).

<sup>334</sup> It's likely that this references the role that made Affleck a global heartthrob, that in *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, USA, 2001).

Aren't you tired of men leading you? Mocking you, beating you up, or raping you?  
Aren't you tired of being slaves, of not having a job, and of being at their mercy?"

While not all her arguments are actually effective (the women reply "we're widows", and "we don't want jobs anyway"), the vast majority of the women villagers eventually become tempted by the prospect of having a woman for mayor, so they do declare their support for Jeni.

However, in retaliation, Giovanni reveals the truth behind the girls' absence over the previous year. Whereas in the case of Mungiu's film, the truth is something which none of the characters speaks about, here it is used as revenge, and rather than liberate them, it is designed to further punish and oppress them. Giovanni organises a film screening at the local club, of a "love film with dirty things". It turns out that it is a pornographic film, titled *Hot Room #5*, which stars Jeni and Lenuta, and which seems to have the desired effect, that of turning the (predominantly male) audience against the two sisters. This speaks to the relentless abuse that the woman body continues to be subjected to in a society dominated by men, which rule both the judicial system and the economy. In this environment, the woman is trapped and her body becomes merely an object.

Nevertheless, while the male characters are positioned like that, the film itself is not, and Helmi makes room for a deeper truth to be uttered. The porno film that Giovanni proclaims to be *the* truth is in fact just the visible part of the truth, and it falls to Lenuta to complete the picture. She makes an emotional attempt to interrupt the screening by reading a written complaint out loud. She recounts everything that she and Jeni had gone through: how they were sold to human traffickers at the Serbian border; how they

were beaten and sold again until they ended up at a bar in Kosovo; how they tried to escape but were caught; how they were locked in a room for 11 months; how they were forced to become prostitutes and were never paid; how their pimp beat them and made them starve, and how the local police was part of the operation too; how some American soldiers found them and helped them escape.

Her way of uncovering the truth, of speaking the unspoken, of bringing sexual abuse out in the open, is thorough, methodical and precise. It is a reparative act not unrelated to Mungiu's intention evident in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Whereas Mungiu confronts the audience with their complicity of silence and their unwillingness to accept the truth of sexual trauma, *The Italian Girls* comes to replace rumours with facts, and to complement the visible evidence with background information and motivations. While more straightforward in its intentions, and perhaps less coherent from an aesthetic point of view, the film is equally important, due to the ways in which it tries to build a more complex understanding of how society, the economy and politics impact and potentially inflict traumas on the individual, from whom ownership of their body and of their sexuality has been taken away.

## **IX.6. *Beyond the Hills* vs *Love Sick*. Toward an Intersectional**

### **Understanding of Non-Normative Sexualities**

I would next like to talk about queerness in a specific cinematic context, that of the so-called "Romanian New Wave", and, to date, the only two features by Romanian filmmakers which focus on non-normative or queer relationships, *Love Sick* by Tudor Giurgiu, and *Beyond the Hills* by Cristian Mungiu. This deficit of queer visibility in

Romanian cinema is a reflection of a wider one, manifest in Eastern Europe in general, where few queer-themed films have been made, even in recent years<sup>335</sup>.

For my analysis in this last section, I choose to use ‘intersectionality’ as a tool, in addition to a remark which Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett make in the introduction to their book *Queer in Europe*, where they say that the presence of intersectionality in European scholarship is “arguably less programmatic and compulsory” than in American scholarship, but nevertheless “very present”<sup>336</sup>. I therefore want to propose working with intersectionality as a possible “way in” when looking at queerness in contemporary Romanian cinema, and by extension in other Eastern European cinemas.

Intersectionality has been quite a contested and/or misused concept, with definitions that slightly vary from one writer to another. For the sake of simplicity though, I put forward Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s definition, which is that:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organisation of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work

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<sup>335</sup> In recent years, the few exceptions include *Plynace wiezowce / Floating Skyscrapers* (Tomasz Wasilewski, Poland, 2013), *W imie... / In the Name of* (Malgorzata Szumowska, Poland, 2013), and *Viharsarok / Land of Storms* (Adam Csaszai, Hungary / Germany, 2014).

<sup>336</sup> Downing, Lisa and Robert Gillett eds. *Queer in Europe*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 4.

together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.<sup>337</sup>

While there are three main pillars, or axes of social division, that are usually seen as the foundation of intersectionality – race, gender and sexuality – there are others of equal importance, which I will be mostly referring to, including class, economic status or profession, education, (dis)ability (both physical and learning-related), ethnicity, citizenship etc.

It is in the turbulent socio-political context in which LGBT rights and their visibility have been fought for and contested (as explained above), that, in 2006, Romanian filmmaker Tudor Giurgiu (who is also the founder of the now well-reputed Transilvania International Film Festival) directs his first feature film, *Legaturi bolnavicioase / Love Sick*. This is based on the novel *Legaturi bolnavicioase* by Romanian writer Cecilia Stefanescu. It tells the story of two girls, Alexandra (nicknamed Alex, played by Ioana Barbu), who moves from a village in the provinces to Bucharest, in order to complete her literary studies, and Cristina (nicknamed Kiki, played by Maria Popistasu), who is Alex's new neighbour and colleague, and who also has a controversial relationship with her brother Alexandru (nicknamed Sandu, played by singer Tudor Chirila). Forced to choose between the two, Kiki ends up fully engaging in the incestuous relationship with her brother, and dismisses her lesbian relationship with Alex as mere love folly (which Zita Farkas suggests is an indication that, as they grow old, the girls will become heterosexual, as most “respectable” Romanian women do<sup>338</sup>).

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<sup>337</sup> Hill Collins, Patricia and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016, 3.

<sup>338</sup> Farkas, Zita. “The Double Bind of Visibility: Mainstreaming Lesbianism in *Love Sick*”. In *Queer*

*Love Sick* is the most popular Romanian film with Romanian filmgoers in 1996, not least because it is the first film in which a non-heteronormative relationship is presented in a Romanian context. However, I believe the film deploys what I call anti-intersectional strategies that prevent a genuine engagement and a complex understanding of what queer life is like in Romania.

Firstly, the characters' queerness is constructed as being alien to traditional Romania. This tradition is represented by Alex's parents, who live a quiet, semi-autarchic life in the country, with minimal connections to the bustling world beyond the village borders. They resemble a model family unit, still married after many years, and looking after their household where, potentially, Alex could return and settle down with a husband and children. By contrast, Kiki and Sandu's family home is less idyllic, with tensions exploding during Sunday dinners, after some have too much to drink. The father shouts at both his children, and is quietly resentful of the mother, for reasons undisclosed. It is this urban environment of fragmented relationships that allegedly taints and corrupts Alex, who would not have been able to explore queerness otherwise, given her correctly moral country upbringing.

Secondly, the film makes an evident connection between queerness and perversion. Both in its original version and in the English translation, the title equates the same-sex relationship with incest, with both being haunted under an aura of malady – not just as far as the individual is concerned, but also in terms of what society perceives as being

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*Visibility in Post-socialist Structures*, edited by Andrea P. Balogh and Narcisz Fejes. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013, 185.

sickness. Both Maria Popistasu and Ioana Barbu have been very vocal about the title of the film having been in complete contrast to the purity of relationship they were trying to depict. However, according to Farkas, this is something less apparent in the book, which focusses much more on the incestuous relationship between Kiki and Sandu. Farkas interprets the film's change of focus on the lesbian relationship as a marketing move on the one hand (two Romanian girls in love with each other would be a first for Romanian audiences), but also as an attempt not to disrupt viewers in their comfort zones. Queerness is therefore put in opposition to acceptable sexual behaviours, (whatever these might be), in order to make it comfortably digestible to homophobic audiences.

The third way in which the film positions itself anti-intersectionally is by showing queerness as lacking specificity. Other than sex and nationality (even that only perceivable through the language spoken by the characters), *Love Sick* makes no reference to the contemporary socio-political context – the film could roughly be set anywhere, anytime. For the most part, it also hesitates to qualify the relationship between Alex and Kiki as lesbian. When it is finally named as such, it is done in an accusatory manner, and only as a retort from the character uttering the word (Sandu) having been accused of being a “pervert”. This very much mirrors the type of behaviours discussed throughout this thesis, by which complex (and perhaps progressive) discourses on sexuality are rendered powerless by ambiguity, and by a lack of commitment to look at sexuality in a well-defined historical and socio-political context.

Positioning the story within this void makes it difficult to understand the specificity and the complexity of the queer experience in Romania, something that at first glance may also be perceived in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*, another entry in the Romanian New Wave canon, rewarded with the Best Screenplay and Best Actress awards at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012, among many other distinctions.

The film is based on Tatiana Niculescu-Bran's bestselling non-fiction book *Spovedanie la Tanacu / Confession at Tanacu*, an account of the killing of a nun during an exorcism performed at a monastery in the Moldavian region of Romania, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rather than using a lesbian love story subplot for marketing and sensationalism purposes (as, by all accounts, *Love Sick* seems to have), Mungiu uses the real-life story of Niculescu-Bran's book as a framing device for his project of understanding a specific type of queer experience.

In the film, Germany-based Alina (Cristina Flutur) returns to Romania to visit her lifelong friend (and, as it turns out, love interest) Voichita (Cosmina Stratan), who is in the process of becoming a nun at a remote monastery, ruled with an iron fist by a priest that the nuns have nicknamed 'Tati' (translatable as Daddy). Frustrated by her inability to persuade Voichita to return to Germany with her, Alina begins to systematically challenge the nuns and the priest's hypocrisy, as well as the Orthodox dogma they practise, only to be branded as "possessed", and to be ultimately killed following an exorcism performed on her by Daddy.

Superficially, the film seems to have a similar anti-intersectional approach to the queer



relationship as *Love Sick*, suggesting that one “can’t be both”, that is both queer, and something else.

Firstly, queerness seems to be placed in direct opposition to nationality. ‘Tati’ suggests that it is the foreign country that has corrupted Alina, even though he is not specific about how this “corruption” is manifested. The association between Alina’s proactive queerness (she is the one who always moves toward Voichita, the more passive member of this relationship) and her return from Germany, where she wants to also take Voichita, suggests that, in Romania, they can’t live their queerness together. The West is thus constructed as the space of queerness, which does not belong to Romania.

Secondly, queerness is opposed to religion, according to the priest. He tries to convince Voichita that the path she has chosen, the love of God, excludes the love of people. On a superficial level, Voichita herself embodies the love of people (by expressing her need to “look after” Alina). More importantly, Alina herself is an exponent of this love, regardless of whether the priest is aware of it or not. The third possible axis of division is one of simple humanity, with which queerness is perceived to be impossible to intersect. Daddy rejects the possibility for Alina’s desires to really be her own (blaming an indefinable, unspecific “devil” instead). Alina’s violent reaction to this rejection of her humanity will lead to the climax of the film, the equally violent exorcism performed on her.

However, this seemingly anti-intersectional perspective illustrates more the priest’s (and perhaps society’s) point of view, rather than the film’s own positioning. As Alina gains more agency (thus turning into the actual protagonist of the film), Mungiu begins to turn

the tables, unveiling the complexities of non-normativity as oppressed, primarily by religion and the Orthodox cult, in the Romanian context.

On the one hand, there is an entire subplot related to the girls' class, social background and economic status. Unlike *Love Sick*, queerness also has economic and social specificity, and does not just exist in a bubble for the sake of the filmic product (which it does, in Giurgiu's film). The girls come from poor families, and have grown up in an orphanage, where they may have been abused by Western European men, posing as helpers or saviours. These types of stories are relatively common in post-communist Romania. In the context of the film therefore, they do gain this specificity too, which is, again, an intersectional rather than a non-intersectional device. There are other examples of contemporary socio-economic issues that *Beyond the Hills* references, without making a disassociation between these and queerness. For example, the fact that Alina renounces the money she has worked hard to earn abroad, in order to be with Voichita at the monastery, and the revelation that her foster parents have stolen some of that money, echo the very specific tensions in Romanian society caused by the widespread work migration. These migrant workers usually save up to build houses, or buy cars, something which Alina may have been doing as well. Now, she gives it all up toward the accomplishment of her queer desires.

Mungiu also seems to approach the non-queer intersectionally as well, and by this I mean religion itself, the Orthodox Church and its rituals. A non-intersectional approach would have seen the Church and the characters of the priest and the nuns as positioned outside any axes of division. What *Beyond the Hills* actually does is deconstruct the

homogeneity of this non-queer authority, by revealing some of its less visible facets and placing it along axes of division. For instance, there are repeated references to the nuns' lives before they had become nuns, to their broken families and to their financial difficulties. Religious authority, the entity opposing queerness, is therefore not as “non-queer” as it advocates itself to be.

In addition to its narrative construction, *Beyond the Hills* also adopts an intersectional lens to look at queerness through its dialogue. When she is prohibited from being in church, due to the fact she is on her period, Alina becomes very vocal – and *vocally intersectional* – admonishing the nuns and the priest that “God is everyone’s, not just yours, just so you know!”. In other words, as a queer presence, she has as much ownership of religion and spirituality as the non-queer authorities, and she demands that she is seen and understood as an intersection of queerness and religion. This is just another example in which the film becomes a critique of anti-intersectionality rather than position itself anti-intersectionally, as *Love Sick* does.

What have tried to suggest in this section is that, as the battle for equal rights spreads across Europe, with the main argument against them being that a certain nation just doesn't have the local / specific traditions to encompass this diversity, filmmakers may use intersectional strategies to problematize and challenge both any homophobic assumptions, and the degree of confusion surrounding the appropriate ways in which to work with queer politics in Eastern European contexts. In other words, intersectional strategies can be potential keys to both decipher the complexity of representing non-normative sexualities, in films that often fall through the cracks of established screen

studies scholarship.

## **IX.7. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the ways in which filmic representations of sexuality were shaped by the socio-politic and cultural challenges of the most recent period in Romanian film culture (the last 10-15 years). It has complemented the discussion in previous chapters surrounding the tension between screening sexuality out of the public debate, on the one hand, and screening it on screen, by arguing for the potential of films to both confront past traumas in order to encourage understanding and responsibility for them (as shown by *4 Months, 2 Weeks, and 3 Days*, which deals with the experience of illegal abortion and rape under state socialism), and shed light on the potentially traumatic realities of the present (as illustrated by *The Italian Girls* in relation to the phenomenon of sex work in post-communism).

I have also shown how the tendency of queerness to become an all-effacing category, which erases the possibility of queer individuals to be seen as complex, heterogenic, intersectional entities, can be both reinforced and subverted cinematically. While this reinforcement is often at least permitted, if not conditioned, by attitudes within the wider society (as *Love Sick* shows), *Beyond the Hills* displays a programmatic tendency to subvert and challenge this unifying view through an intersectional discourse. I argue that this is a filmmaking strategy that could be adopted in order to yield more accurate and complex representations of non-normative sexualities.



## CONCLUSION OF STUDY

This thesis has dealt with representations of sex and sexuality throughout the history of Romanian cinema, and the ways in which various factors have come together to influence and shape these representations. Tracing these representations and their contexts decade by decade allows for a better understanding of, on the one hand, the changes which occur moving forward through history and, on the other hand, of some of the common threads which remain unchanged regardless of whether political, economic or social progress happens. While the focus of the thesis stays on the Romanian film culture and its particularities, the common traits it shares with other film cultures from Eastern Europe and the Balkans would enable a similar use of this framework if one were to study the relationship between cinema and sexuality in this specific region and possibly beyond. Indeed, it is a transnational impulse that is the basis of this study. If one agrees that one cannot study films without considering the contexts in which they are made, distributed and received, the transnational perspective becomes not just necessary, but essential. This thesis takes a two-pronged approach in this respect. On the one hand, it attempts to explore the ways in which sexuality as represented in Romanian cinema (that is, films made in the Romanian context) could possibly provide an understanding of film sexuality in general, or at least nuance the discussion concerning sexuality in the cinema. On the other hand, it also looks at how sexuality as represented in other film cultures travels to, and is received within, the specific Romanian context.

Given this context, the study's primary area of exploration is that of visibility, i.e. the

visibility of sexuality in the Romanian film culture. In a time when questions of visibility, representation and identity are at the forefront of the debate not just in film studies, but in the global film culture (and the various film industries that are part of it), I argue for the importance of understanding the factors that may shape this visibility, that can either restrict or allow it depending on the production context, the distribution context and the reception context. While the Hollywood film industry seems to steal the lime light in the debate on representation, it is important to reiterate that not all film cultures produce film industries or, in other words, that not all film cultures are driven by economic factors, which are more often than not the drivers behind the ways in which filmmakers deal with sex and sexuality on screen. In Dagmar Herzog's words, if "nations still can take their own distinctive paths with regard to sex"<sup>339</sup>, so can national film cultures. Therefore, this approach introduces more complex ways of understanding visibility and representation in cinema. The political configuration of the context, the economic and social status of audiences, and indeed cultural and social customs, whether national or transnational, are equally important in understanding the complexity of representing sexuality in cinema.

For most of its history, the Romanian film culture (as the country itself) was dominated by the tension between a cultural and political specificity that comes with its geographical and geopolitical position on the one hand, and its Western aspirations, that is, the impulse to get in touch with a wider European heritage and being recognised as being a rightful part of this heritage. This study has tried to show how this tension is also apparent in terms of representations of sexuality in film, specifically in regards to

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<sup>339</sup> Herzog, *Syncopated Sex*, 1299.

showcasing sexuality in an honest and liberated manner versus concealing matters related to sexuality and intimacy in line with a tradition of repressed morality as well as with political and ideological repressive mechanisms. This constant tension, or struggle, and the various ways in which its meanings are manifest, contested and redefined, represent one of the possible answers to the research questions formulated at the beginning of this study: *How has the Romanian film culture been dealing with the themes of sex, sexuality, and sexual identities over the course of the last century? Subsequently, how have politics, society, and economy been influencing and controlling these representations?* In order to answer these questions, I found it necessary to divide the study into three major historical areas of investigation, according to the particularities inflicted on these periods by the dominant political and social order of the times.

## **I. Romania Before State Socialism**

In the first part, which focussed on the period between the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the aftermath of the Second World War, during which Romania was a flourishing monarchy (though ruled by mostly right-wing governments), the thesis found that, as far as representing sex and sexuality on screen, visibility was not really an issue, although tensions did start to arise between this natural, unfiltered manner of dealing with erotic matter on-screen, and a pro-regulatory discourse put forward by Romanian critics and lawmakers, mirroring events in the Western world. While the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were, for the most part, rather unregulated and adventurous as far as film technology, production and exhibition, as well as matters of representation, were concerned. As shown in this section, the vast majority of films produced in Romania



during this period revolved around matters of the heart and the pursuit of erotic accomplishments, often in contrast with the dominant morality, on which the Orthodox Church, with its precepts relating to abstinence and the repression of any biological needs and instincts, had an overwhelming influence. The church influence notwithstanding, the dominant morality was strongly traditionalist as it was: Romania was predominantly rural, an agrarian and patriarchal country with centuries-old traditions and customs, in which gender-roles were unambiguously defined. As the number of towns and cities was low, and as cinemas were exclusively available in these urban areas, the impact of “sentimental dramas” (arguably the most popular film genre in pre-WWII Romania), as well as of (few) raunchier comedies, was also less than significant in terms of what they could do change or at least alter the traditionalist, repression-prone morality.

To show how there were tendencies to restrict, but not reconfigure, screen sexuality, I then brought forth several examples of critical (or at least public) interventions from the period prior to the Great War, to demonstrate how these went to further dwindle, or minimise the liberating potential of dealing with erotic themes in the first decades of cinema in the region. While not specifically censorious, popular writers called for a shift in the thematic focus of Romanian films from matters of the heart to the imagined glories of the national past, introducing critically dangerous concepts such as “value”, which one could easily use to eliminate specific themes (such as love and sexuality) from an officially-sanctioned cinema. Thus, the notion of “value” also acted, to a certain extent, as a site for the contestation of meaning of screen sexuality.

Other voices of authority took this further and called for the strict regulation of not just films produced in Romania, but also the increasing number of imports, in terms of making obvious (i.e. visible) their alleged sexual explicitness and therefore their “immorality”, which was thus put in direct opposition to the accepted, traditionalist morality.

This section also looked at two examples from different decades of the pre-WWII period to explore, on the one hand, the primitive place of romantic pursuits within the wider context of revisiting the glorious national history (as illustrated in *The Independence of Romania*), and on the other, the tension between showing and screening out the mechanics and the effects of ambiguous sexual behaviour (as seen in *A Winter Night's Dream*).

Moving forward toward the interwar years, my investigation prompted me to argue that the first state-sanctioned censorship laws and institutions came about by way of (other) critics and public voices calling for tighter regulation, and that the American Hays Code and its principles could have travelled transnationally to inspire and model these public interventions. The increasing popularity of Hollywood films, not just in Romania but across Eastern Europe and the Balkans was incontestable, and just additional evidence that the morality they promoted could have come to shape the morality of films from the region (including Romania). I conclude that the relationships between the early Romanian film censorship system and the Hollywood self-censorship policy, in terms of timeline, articulation and industry dominance, point to the idea of a “colonial morality”, which would inadvertently pave the way for the barely present treatment of sexuality

characteristic of films during state socialism. This repressed morality, with a focus on the individual's role in society rather than in a couple, would therefore transfer from one coloniser to another. The tension between eroticism and sexuality being an integral part of the social corpus, and the reluctance to allow them visibility in the sphere of cinema, would remain present in the Romanian film culture during state socialism.

## **II. Romania During State Socialism**

In this second, and largest, section of the study, I argue that the visibility of representations of sex and sexuality was infringed upon, as well as reconceptualised and reconfigured, by the repressive ideology of state socialism, which governed Romania from the end of the Second World War until December 1989. As each decade was characterised by specific political, social, economic and cultural developments, I have further split the strand of the research to look at each one in detail.

The first chapter of this section examines the ways in which the cinematic discourse reflected the Stalinist ideology, manifested in the arts and culture as socialist realism and the preoccupation for the birth of a new state order, as well as the creation of a “new man”. The creation of the ideal socialist citizen would not be possible without a virulent criticism against the old ways. Based on this, I argue that films such as *The Mill of Good Luck*, while aesthetically accomplished and superior to pre-war films, were instrumental in the class struggle. Sexuality was repurposed to serve the ideology: it was represented as decadent, and as a symbol of the moral turpitude of rich rural dwellers, placed in direct opposition to the younger generation of peasants, depicted as

confident in the future, focussed on community rather than love and romance, and willing to contribute to the otherwise traumatic process of collectivisation (as seen in the openly propagandistic *In Our Village*).

The next chapter explores the changes that came about in the 1960s, a decade of semi-liberalisation, also evident in terms of how sex and sexuality were represented on-screen. I show how the increased visibility of themes related to sexuality and intimacy was mainly due to the somewhat looser approach that state censorship had in terms of film and television imports, as Romanians had access, during this decade, to a wide variety of (mostly European) audiovisual releases in which eroticism was prominent, ranging from arthouse films like Antonioni's alienation trilogy, to broad entertainment such as Spanish or French melodramas. The weaker vigilance of the censorship also made possible the making of a handful of subversive films such as *A Film with a Charming Girl*, only for these to be immediately banned from being screened publicly. The tension between the creative impulse of representing sexuality on film and the ideological repressive mechanism comes to a clash in this decade, and it would shape the Romanian film culture of the following 20 years.

From this, the analysis moves onto the culturally neo-stalinist period of the 1970s, also marked by widespread censorship and increasing socio-economical restrictions, including a traumatic anti-abortion decree. This chapter argues that, in opposition to trends apparent throughout Western Europe, honest representations of sex and sexuality in Romanian films became almost inexistent. I do focus on one film which I consider to be an exception to the realm of silence which the state imposed around the anti-abortion

debate, and I argue that *Picture Postcards with Wildflowers*, while validating some of the ideological points put forward by the state, can also be read as undermining and critiquing them. Finally, by looking at the epic film *Michael the Brave*, which inspired the title of this study, I suggest that the obsession of the communist party with heroic rulers from the national history resulted in an increased (and skewed) masculinisation of representations, in which sexuality had no place.

Finally, in the chapter concerning Romania's last decade under state socialism, I examine the apogee of the repressive socialist state against an increasingly dehumanised population. I argue that, as far as both film culture, and representations of sexuality on film were concerned, the increasing methods of dissent and subversiveness were at least augmented, if not empowered, by the increased restrictions and methods of suppression. To illustrate this, the chapter examines the phenomenon of underground VHS distribution, which would practically end up replacing the stale repetitive programming of state-owned cinemas. The chapter also showcases the disruptive filmic output of director Mircea Daneliuc in the early 1980s, which in its bleak and uncompromising critique of repression, as well as its positive case for genuine erotic relationships, deeply contrasts with the cleansed platonic connections advocated by the ideologically-aligned *High School* trilogy. This opposition once more underlines the tension between hiding and making visible, which has characterised sexuality in Romanian cinema culture in previous decades.

### **III. Romania After State Socialism**

In this final section, the thesis moved to explore how the liberalisation of Romania after the fall of state socialism and the transition to democracy led to freedom of expression and the uninhibited representation of sex and sexuality on screen. However, this was problematized by putting the dissolution of official censorship in context, showing how the new political, economic and social issues specific to the post-communist world, while shaping this representation and increasing the visibility of eroticism in the Romanian film culture, has not always meant a refining of the discourse and a liberalisation of attitudes. Indeed, the tension between reactionary and retrograde tendencies (empowered by the rising influence of the Orthodox Church), and more progressive values (of which visibility is part of), has continued to underline both the social debate, and the cinematic representations of sexuality.

The first chapter in this section focussed on the immediate effects of the fall of state socialism in Romania, and the different ways in which the country opened up to the values of Western democracies, in particular through increased (and often unregulated) access to American culture. I explore how the popularity of films and television series from both North America and South America often went hand in hand with the appetite of Romanian audiences for romance and melodrama, which acted as compensation for the repression of the socialist years. On the other hand, I argue, it can also be seen as an escape from the harsh economic and social turmoil: with individuals struggling to make sense of the new market economy and their place within it, as well as with the mutations that this inflicted on ideas of masculinity and femininity, the ideal of romantic

happiness promoted in these Western film and television imports acted as reassurance of the possibility of personal accomplishment. On the other hand, I focus on the pessimistic critique that Romanian filmmakers such as Mircea Daneliuc construct in their films. I argue that, in his film *The Conjugal Bed*, Daneliuc offers a non-filtered perspective of the dreary state of things in post-communism, when the pursuit of erotic accomplishment is trumped by the pursuit of financial gains and of power.

The final chapter of this study examines representations of sexuality in the post-2000 period in Romanian cinema, marked by the Romanian New Wave. This nominally brings together a string of realist films made by a new generation of filmmakers, usually in co-production with other European countries, which showcase an appetite for honest debate and unsparing critique not unrelated to Daneliuc in earlier decades. On the one hand, I show how the cinematic treatment of sexuality is used in films like *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* in order to reckon with the trauma of sexual repression and violence that state socialism produced by means of the anti-abortion decree. The tension between keeping hidden and bringing into the visible matters of sex and sexuality is made evident in relation to not just the communist past, but also the puzzling and disorienting world of post-communism, something which I attempt to trace in the case study on *The Italian Girls* and its theme of sex traffic. Finally, this last chapter also acts as a celebration of non-normative sexual identities finally becoming visible in Romanian cinema, and argues for the use of an intersectional framework in order to understand the complexities of dealing with queerness in films made in what is essentially a homophobic and diversity-averse society, as that of most Eastern European countries.

The continuous increase of the globalisation as well as the democratisation of filmmaking will undoubtedly lead to both the diversification of representations, and their wider reach. Understanding the ways in which other film cultures address issues of sex and sexuality can facilitate our understanding of the global film culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, of sex and sexuality in both the global world, and our smaller, more local worlds. For this understanding to happen, visibility and awareness are of primordial importance though, and this is the area in which this thesis aims to make its modest contribution.

By looking to examine the ways in which systems of “material and institutional power” define and redefine sexuality in a (geopolitical) area insufficiently explored in film studies scholarship, this project can also be seen as a “minoritarian” work, in Carol Siegel’s understanding of the term, put in opposition to “majoritarians”: “Majoritarian political groups, writings, and works of art are not necessarily the majority in any particular time or place, but are always in support of the major centers of political power and what is most valued in the dominant discourse. In contrast to the majoritarian, the minoritarian fosters unlimited becoming, with the addition of each new member expanding and revising the meanings attached to that group.”<sup>340</sup> I hope that this project too expands and revises meanings within the existing scholarship. On the one hand, it does so by trying to show there is more than just one way to think about (film) sexuality: if “there can be no sexuality more human than any other to the minoritarian”<sup>341</sup>, can there be one method of approaching sexuality more valid than any other? On the other hand, I wish my project can foster “unlimited becoming” too, by

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<sup>340</sup> Siegel, *Sex Radical Cinema*, 14.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.



encouraging similar minoritarian work from similar minoritarians, to help further expand and revise perspectives, methods, and meaning.

The impulse behind this study can also be understood as a warning that reaches beyond film studies. Ideas of liberalism, democracy and freedom have been wildly contested in these past few years, and across the globe there has been a dangerous revival of authoritarian and anti-egalitarian ideologies, threatening a reversal of the once-thought irreversible “progress of history” in the name of reductive national or cultural identities. First to be sacrificed on the altar of these ideologies are the rights of individuals, not least those pertaining to the freedom to take ownership and responsibility of one’s own body, in relation to itself, as well as to the bodies of other individuals. Sexual rights and the rights to be sexual are not a given, and in order to preserve these, society, whether local or global, must remain alert and aware. While the visibility of representations is essential to the consolidation and the preservation of the democratic rights of the represented, it is not enough. It’s in this sense that this project also acts as an *aide-memoire*. For it is by revisiting, understanding and remembering the past, whether shown on screen or not, that living in the present, as well as looking forward, are made possible.

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