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Cold war, hot stuff. The official critical discourse and the desirability of film stars in socialist Romania

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which Romanian socialist politics and state-sanctioned film journalism intersected around film sexuality and foreign film stardom, in order to reinforce the official discourse on sexual morality in the 1960s and 1970s. The '60s represented a decade of political and ideological semi-relaxation in socialist Romania. Film audiences retained some access to Western productions, and foreign film stars carried significant erotic appeal to viewers. The state-funded *Cinema* magazine aimed to disrupt these tendencies either by arguing that the objects of desire were representative of lower quality cinema, or, in full-on Cold War style, by building the case for the decline of Western capitalism through pinpointing all manifestations of sexuality as a symptom of it. This article looks at the ways in which ideological arguments to “redact” film sexuality, while failing to repurpose it, managed to redirect it and reposition it as alien to socialist culture. The article also explores the continuation of this trend during the 1970s, when film stardom and the seductive appeal of film stars were validated by their conformation to political and historical ideologies directly linked to the concerns of the Romanian Communist Party.

KEYWORDS

film stars; Romanian cinema; Eastern Europe; transnational stardom; film criticism; state socialism

Introduction

In the opening paragraphs of his seminal study *Stars*, Richard Dyer contends that the reasons for studying stars academically stemmed from either a sociological concern, or a semiotic one. The former concern, Dyer argues, “centres on the stars as a remarkable, and probably influential or symptomatic, social phenomenon, as well as being an aspect of film’s ‘industrial’ nature”. In the latter, “stars are only of significance because they are in films and therefore are part of the way films signify” (Dyer 1986, 1). While, in his view, the concerns are mutually interdependent, Dyer places the (film) text as primordial in the study of film stars. Since Dyer’s book, film text has become less central to star studies, but even more recently it has been argued that scholarship in this field continues to develop “along two distinct lines: how stars work [...] and how stars act or perform” (Shingler 2012, 183). This article proposes a methodological alternative: while film stars are central to this discussion, this is not necessarily a “star studies” article as such, or if it is, then it is more in the lineage of Jackie Stacey’s

audience research (Stacey 1991) – direct and applied, primary research, rather than a purely theoretical endeavour. This article puts forward a historical perspective on how film criticism and film journalism are able to use stars and manipulate the discourse around them, in order to make or reinforce ideological arguments within a specific socio-political context (ideology is used here to designate one of a plurality of *ideologies* rather than ideology as “a characteristic of all human societies”, as per Richard Dyer’s distinction in his introduction to *Stars* [2]). In its scope, it aims to contribute to both star studies, by focussing on a geopolitical area insufficiently explored in the field so far, as well as to film studies more generally, where studies of film criticism and film journalism also tend to be relatively few and far between.

It is also worth mentioning that this is not an exhaustive study of socialist Romania’s film journalism and its relationship to film stars. Due to time and space constraints, the article focuses primarily on the *Cinema* magazine during the 1960s and 1970s. It is also not aiming to position itself either for or against the ways in which Romanian film critics of the socialist era approached film stars. The conclusions arrived at throughout the investigation are based on what the source material put forward, positioned and interpreted within the socio-political context as it is now understood. Further research on how other socialist publications managed their relationship to film stardom is, without a doubt, more than welcome.

Socio-political contextualisation

The 1960s are now regarded as a period of “liberalisation”, or “semi-thaw”, in Romania, not necessarily in terms of cinema, but more generally, in many aspects of life and culture. This stemmed from 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; 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. 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. In practice, this decree did not have the desired result. While abortions did become illegal, they did not actually cease to exist. In Gail Kligman’s words, the decree simply “renders the practice invisible in the public sphere” (Kligman 1998, 6).

During the 1970s, Nicolae Ceaușescu formalised his position as supreme leader of the Romanian state by creating the function of President of the Republic for himself. Ceaușescu’s ascension as the ultimate public figure – not just political, but also cultural – ultimately spilled into what is now referred to as his “cult of personality”. Ceaușescu became 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 – the ultimate superstar. This cult of personality later expanded to include his wife, Elena, and the pair became the pattern onto which all Romanian couples were meant to 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 Ceaușescu’s cult of personality had their roots in a month-long visit he made to China,

North Korea, North Vietnam and Mongolia, in June 1971. Just weeks after this visit, the socialist leaders 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*, now more commonly known as *The July Theses*. Several historians, including Cioroianu, Tismăneanu and Verdery, refer to this plan as being rather Maoist, marking the beginning of a small-scale Cultural Revolution in Romania.

Essentially, in order to fill in alleged gaps in the political, ideological, educational and cultural activity of the Communist Party, Ceaușescu and his subordinates 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 party 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 (Ceaușescu 1971).

There were clear references to the arts and culture, in Ceaușescu’s “theses”: “art must [now] serve the people, the country, the socialist society”. 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 musical 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” were completely eliminated. In regards to the film industry and film distribution, Ceaușescu’s plan overtly prohibited “films that cultivate violence and vulgarity, that propagate the bourgeois way of life” (Ceaușescu 1971), while also specifically advising toward limiting certain genre films, e.g. *policier* and action adventure.

Various degrees of popularity. The appeal of foreign stars

When talking about Polish and Czechoslovak cinema, Ewa Mazierska argues that the 1960s represented “the true ‘decade of love’”, in which feelings (and their representation on screen) became “fashionable” (Mazierska 2010, 150). This fit in with a broader trend in world cinema, marked by “new waves” that brought a more open and a somewhat more complex perspective on issues concerning the individual and society, of which desire and sexuality were part of. This may also be true in the case of the film culture in Romania, but to a lesser degree and with several differentiating nuances. The tension between on-screen and off-screen eroticism, on the one hand, and the political demands of state censorship on the other, comes into focus in this first part of the article, 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.

Similarly to other countries in Eastern Europe, Romania saw an increase in living standards in the second half of the 1960s, which led to a diversified offering in terms of goods, and also in terms of culture and entertainment. An increasing number of households could now afford to buy not just cars, refrigerators, or washing machines, but also television sets, most of which tended to be produced either in Romania, or in the neighbouring countries of the Eastern bloc. In addition to Romanian productions, the national television channel also began broadcasting television series from the Western world, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom (this trend would continue successfully into the

1970s). Some of the most 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), or *The Forsyte Saga* (UK, 1967). Most of these shows were in the action-adventure genre (the now lesser known *Daktari*, for instance, was a children's series focusing on the adventures of an American veterinarian in East Africa), and some of them appealed to Romanian audiences in very special ways. 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 memory of his sex appeal as the titular character in *The Saint* would last well into the 1980s.

Cinemas as cultural practice was also becoming increasingly popular during the 1960s. In 1963, Romanian cinemas were welcoming an estimated half a million spectators a day. Access to cinemas was not restricted to urban areas. In the decade and a half since Romania had become a socialist country, around 3,800 cinemas had been built in villages around the country. The *Cinema* magazine article which quoted these figures ("200.000.000!", 1963) also praised the wide selection of foreign films screening across the country, both from the Eastern bloc and from the West, 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 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 present 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).

During the Cold War, it was common practice across the Eastern bloc to give voice to "concerned" members of the public, in order for them to speak against Western culture and its inappropriateness to socialist audiences. Film was no exception. Some of the very successful commercial films shown in Romania at the time included the Italian costume drama *The Mongols/I mongoli* (Andre de Toth, Leopoldo Savona, 1961), which features a few semi-nude scenes involving sex symbols Anita Ekberg and Antonella Lualdi, as well as peplum *Carthage in Flames/Cartagina in fiamme* (Carmine Gallone, 1960). While semi-nudity was very common to such sword-and-sandal films, and were an important component of the stars' appeal, 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" ("Ce filme românești vrem să vedem", 1963, 26), and about the films themselves, which, according to the same anonymous spectator, were depicting history in a way that actually "vulgarised" it.

The Young Ones (Sidney J. Furie, UK, 1961) was also very popular at the Romanian box-office. The film plays on Cliff Richard's appeal as a British Elvis Presley, as well as on

the potential of rock'n'roll music to liberate people in their teens and twenties from the repressive constraints of their conservative parents. Once more though, *Cinema* magazine managed to find a “regular” (and anonymous) spectator who was allegedly dissatisfied with the film for inaccurately representing the lives of the younger generation. This tactic of highlighting the views of “concerned” members of the public 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 “corrupt” (i.e. highly sexualised, capitalist) film stars. The fact that this was often contradicted by relatively high audience figures is a symptom of the ineffectual nature of the socialist propaganda – and it only goes to fan its flames even more.

Film critics faithful to the regime were a powerful weapon against the perceived danger of Western ideology as promoted by cinema. They were quick to dismiss, for example, Roger Vadim's cinematic meditations on desire, attraction and eroticism. In an article on the French New Wave, S. Damian blamed the indulgence with which Vadim dwelled on issues of sex and sexuality for commercial purposes (Damian 1964, 8):

“Announced as a reaction to conventionality, many films end up flattening their rather innovative formula, creating one convention to replace another. This leads to the establishment of new 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 settings of some films by Vadim, Philippe de Broca,¹ Jacques Doniol-Valcroze² are the ultra-modern bedsits, in which one can hear the syncopated sound of the recorder, the dance steps of a sketchily dressed actress, the gurgling of cognac. The surfeiting of a younger generation electrified only by fast driving on the highway and by sexual perversions is painted with a benevolent complicity.”

With that last line, Damian suggested that the newly discovered sexual freedom of the younger generation should be cinematically handled with anything but benevolence and/or complicity, and he dismissed it all as being “frivolous”. While Damian didn't name specific Vadim films, 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 *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” (‘Secvențe’, 1964a).

On the other hand, *Cinema* seemed to take a liking to international film stars who had made a move away from such vulgarity toward more “serious” terrains. One such example was Gina Lollobrigida. In 1965, in an ample article, *Cinema* applauded her for her “new personality”. The author, writing in correspondence from Rome, praised her “healthy common sense”, and seemed struck by how Lollobrigida had become an avid reader of poetry as well as literary fiction ranging from Stendhal to Alberto Moravia, all of this in stark contrast to the more seductive, less cerebral persona which made her famous. While the *Playboy* magazine was likely unknown (not to mention available) to Romanian audiences, revealing its existence seemed to be acceptable when it was done for the supreme ideological purpose, i.e. that of illustrating the moral degradation of the West. This was presumably all

the more effective when a Western star could be used as a vehicle for this type of propaganda, as shown in this paragraph (Rosett 1965, 11):

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

While Lollobrigida, Brigitte Bardot and even Sophia Loren were a constant presence in the pages of the state-controlled film magazine (quite discretely in the first half of the decade, but more frequently toward the end), there was one other international female film star, perhaps even more popular with Romanian audiences, but who did not seem to get the same validation and support from Romanian film critics. In the late 1950s – early 1960s, Spanish singer and actress Sara Montiel starred in a cycle of films directed by Luis Cesar Amadori, which were in very high demand in Romanian cinemas throughout the 1960s: *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, could explain why her films were even slightly more popular with Romanian audiences than Bardot’s and Loren’s. Spectators just seemed besotted with the actress. They lovingly referred to her using her nickname, Sarita, and they did not hesitate to take a stance against the critical disregard in which *Cinema* magazine held her. In a letter addressed to *Cinema* by a group of readers from the Transylvanian town of Mediaş, they offered their own statistics to support their dissatisfaction: “Our favourite artist is Sara Montiel... But in 26 issues [of *Cinema*] she was only present twice! In the same magazine, Sophia Loren and Brigitte Bardot were present about three or four times each!” (‘Dialog cu cititorii’, 1965). *Cinema*’s response was fairly brief and utterly dismissive: Montiel’s celebrity status and her “value” as an actress were simply not deserving of the degree of attention and adoration that readers were granting her. Of equal popularity were Montiel’s co-star in *My Last Tango*, Maurice Ronet, as well as other French heartthrobs, such as Alain Delon and 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 successes in Romania. Readers of *Cinema* would often write in to ask about these particular male stars’ marital status, which was 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 pointed out, in an irritated tone, that they were “not the Registry Office” to be able to answer such queries, they seemed to have their own standards of sex-appeal, singling out Jean-Paul Belmondo as a “standard of modern masculine beauty” (*Cinema*, July 1965). This may be partly due to his features, less polished and aristocratic than Delon’s (and therefore less representative of ‘decadence’), who was more of a “fashion plate”, as suggested by Ginette Vincendeau in her obituary of Belmondo (Vincendeau 2021).

“Good” critics go to cinema, cinema goes against the “bad” west

The institutionalisation of censorship in Romania 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 Româniafilms (the national film production organisation), or in official party meetings (such as those of the Ideological Committee of the Romanian Communist Party), but also, as of 1968, by a commission created within the Film Distribution Service for the Direction of the Cinematographic Network and Film Distribution. The aim of the latter was to put the stamp of approval on film imports.

In this context, film criticism had a very important role in the public approval or rejection of films, and of imports in particular. The opinions voiced by the critics could make or break the chances of a film being shown on the Romanian screens, as well as the popularity of film stars. The *Cinema* magazine was the only dedicated film criticism outlet under Romanian state socialism (film reviews and articles were published in many other magazines and newspapers though). It was edited by the State Committee for Culture and Art and it was genuinely very popular, ever since its first issue in 1963. Most film critics and journalists of the (now) older generation have, at one point, written for *Cinema*. However, it cannot be denied that *Cinema* maintained a complicit relationship with the Communist rule throughout its existence: unless freelancing, the film critics’ continuous employment and commissioning was conditioned implicitly by their adherence to the dominant ideology. In its early 1960s run, *Cinema* was rather liberal, and not much different than film magazines elsewhere: it contained a multitude of photographs and posters of both national and international film stars, interviews, film reviews and in-depth analysis pieces, fan mail, behind-the-scenes reports, and news on international film developments (and, again, film stars). Contributors were travelling to and writing from international film festivals too, which allowed them access to (and opinions on) international productions before they would filter through to Romanian screens. The magazine would, however, become blatantly propagandistic in the 1970s, after the July Theses. Nicolae Ceaușescu’s cult of personality increased to the extent that important filmmakers would publish veritable odes to him, in the pages of *Cinema* (whether signed or unsigned), and by the 1980s each issue of the magazine would open with a few pages of text praising either Nicolae Ceaușescu or the Romanian Communist Party. The focus tended to move from international films and film stars to national ones. Across both decades though, *Cinema* was a key contributor to the pro-socialist, and anti-imperialist public discourse of the Cold War, and issues pertaining to sexuality and the desirability of film stars 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 became a reason for which the film was commended and recommended to Romanian audiences. Take, for example, Silvian Iosifescu’s extended review of the film (Iosifescu 1963), in which he wrote:

“These people that go from cruises 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.”

While this is an accurate and perfectly valid reading of *L'avventura*, Iosifescu's intellectual excitement mirrored rather than questioned Antonioni's view of sexuality, which becomes de-idealised in the absence of “tenderness”. Iosifescu's final remark that Antonioni's films were “important [...] for the terrible diagnosis they give to a society” (Iosifescu 1963) linked the sexual with the ideological: by a society one should understand, of course, the Western one, and the diagnosis was “terrible” because Western capitalism was in terminal decline, at least as far as the Eastern bloc was concerned during the Cold War.

In the same context, communist superstar 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” 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” (‘Secvențe’, 1963).

It is worth mentioning that most of the films listed above come under the general category of arthouse cinema, or were, at the very least, festival favourites. The *Cinema* magazine praised them precisely based on this status, and it often suggested 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).

Beyond the desirability of film stars, 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 pointed this out in his review of *The Age of Love/Vîrsta dragostei* (Francisc Munteanu, 1963). The critic considered naturalness to be “the most distinct note of the film”. In terms of perceiving the erotic relationship and its representation, “naturalness” was 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” (Grigorescu 1963). 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, took a similar critical stance when talking about Abram Room's *The Garnet Bracelet/Granatovyy braslet* (USSR, 1965). In the introduction to her review, Roman complained 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” (Roman 1965). In socialist Romania, this idea of “clean feelings” – ideally embodied by “clean” film actors (or at least reformed ones, in the vein of Gina Lollobrigida) – 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.

Heteronormativity, upon which all these critical and ideological limitations were thrust, was overwhelmingly prevalent in 1960s Romanian culture, as it was in society more generally. By law, people engaging in homosexual acts in public were sent to prison, and in 1968 the Romanian Penal Code was modified so that all homosexual acts were punished.

In this context, it is to be expected that films such as Dirk Bogarde vehicle *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. It can therefore come as a surprise to discover a note on *Victim* in the pages of *Cinema* magazine. This was published three years after the film's release in Western Europe, and its derogatory tone is more than evident: "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" ('Secvențe', 1964b). The overly simplified plot summary is mischievously misleading, and it reflects the hesitation of both the anonymous author, and of socialist Romania as a whole, to speak about homosexuality in terms other than condemnation.

In a similar context, the subversion of heteronormativity and gender roles in the Marilyn Monroe vehicle *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, USA, 1959), completely evaded *Cinema* contributor Al. Crețulescu, although it's not impossible that these themes were deliberately stifled in his review. The critic focused mostly on Sugar Cane's "alcoholism" and "failed existence, torn apart by loneliness" even in her romantic happy-end. For Crețulescu, Marilyn Monroe's character was alone, sad, desperate, bitter and weary, a "singer with no vocation and a woman with too much of it". The reviewer denied Monroe character's erotic accomplishment even when admitting it: "happy-end, but strictly from a sentimental point of view" (Crețulescu 1965). This is an illustration of the muddled logic which was characteristic of the official critical and ideological discourse of the times: erotic fulfilment was a happy end, but precisely because it was erotic, it was actually not that happy at all. 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 can also allude to something more sexual. This was completely absent from the Romanian title, which translates simply as *Some Like Jazz*.

Several more provocative films were not even considered for distribution on Romanian screens. This was facilitated by negative reviews coming in from festivals. *Loving Couples/ Alskande par* (Mai Zetterling, Sweden, 1964) is only one such example. The film, now little known, was a Palme d'Or nominated drama, centred on three mothers who look back on their sex lives, and it starred Harriet Andersson, who had reached fame as the alluring title character in Ingmar Bergman's *Summer with Monika/Sommaren med Monika* (Sweden, 1953). The anonymous festival review published in *Cinema* damns the film as "cruel to the point of savagery, and manly to the point of brutality": "Disregarding all conventions, seemingly ignoring that feeling that dictionaries name as 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" ('Secvențe', 1965). It is difficult to think of a more direct way in which film criticism shaped the availability (or lack thereof) of certain films to Romanian audiences, and implicitly, of which film stars could become objects of desire for the same audiences.

Officially, several important films of the 1960s were deemed non-distributable and were banned from Romanian screens, as they contravened "our ethical-philosophical ideals" (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Romania, 1968). One can safely assume that the sexual morality they depicted was likely a 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) were 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 17th century heroine Angelique³ (films which remained popular for decades to come), were deemed by the party officials as mere “syrupy stories”, “mediocrities in colour” that would just “lead to degrading the taste for beauty” (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Romania, 1968).

One of the most critically acclaimed Romanian films of the 1960s was *The Stranger/Străinul* (Mihai Iacob, 1964). While continuing to look at some of the issues related to class difference and its effect on romantic relationships, present in films from the previous decade, it opened up the debate to previously invisible erotic undercurrents, something which Cristian Tudor Popescu calls “propaganda eroticism” (Popescu 2011, 147). Thus, the male lead Andrei (Ștefan Iordache) was no longer “pure and tough”, as young communist men used to be depicted in Romanian films of the ‘50s. He was 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 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” (Popescu 2011, 149). By extension, it can be argued that certain versions of sexuality and desire, such as those embodied by “acceptable” film stars (e.g. Lollobrigida or Bardot), were left untouched by censorship (whether that of critics, or that of distributors), as they helped make socialist propaganda more widely available, and more effective against the perceived dangers of Western ideology.

1970s Film stardom under nationalism and cultural isolationism

As far as film imports were concerned, the 1970s were marked by a revisionist approach to their distribution in Romanian cinemas. The cultural Cold War now turning into cultural isolationism, critics proceeded to draw the public’s attention to the “artificiality” and “sterility” of any vaguely provocative films from the West. One such example is Ana Maria Narti’s 1970 essay on the success that the film *Valley of the Dolls* (Mark Robson, USA, 1967), starring the late Sharon Tate, had with Romanian audiences.⁴ The popularity of the film “should make one reflect”, according to the critic. Essentially, Narti called *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 she declared herself disappointed with the fact that such “cheap Hollywood delights” or “sub-artistic products” (Narti 1970, 32) should attract a high number of spectators. Admittedly, beyond consolidating Sharon Tate’s star status, 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. It’s also worth remembering that, by the time Narti’s essay was published, Tate was married to Roman Polanski, who had become “filmmaker non grata” as far as the Eastern bloc was concerned, since he had abandoned his native socialist Poland for the alleged decadence of, first France, then

Hollywood, in the early '60s. Nevertheless, the fact that the film was perceived as a success with the Romanian public (though exact 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 depicted sexual acts openly, e.g. Tate's love scene in the film (Popescu 2011, 182).

It is actually difficult to assess 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 and film stars. Giving a film a limited release year after the original hype had died down could prevent accusations 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 intentionally misinterpreted in order to validate a conservative and heteronormative approach to sexuality for its readers. In a short written intervention called simply *Sexploitation*, critic 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 mentioned films such as *Secret Ceremony* (Joseph Losey, UK, 1968), which had superstars 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 struggling with his latent homosexuality. Aldea did not go into detail on any of these films, and there is no evidence available as to whether they were ever distributed in Romanian cinemas. The discourse is, on the one hand, ambiguous, presumably in order to not stir anyone's interest in the "decadent" theme of the films, but on the other hand, it takes an aggressive stand against them. Heavily editorial, Aldea's intervention accused 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)". Once more, this was both a representation and an enforcement of the dominant socialist ideology of the time, which equated sexual difference with sexual aberration and with "moral misery" (Aldea 1971, 33).

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 Günther, 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 male partner, in addition to the fact it was made in the Eastern bloc, and it starred DDR film star Jutta Hoffmann (before her fall from grace caused by her escape to West Germany in the early '80s). In a scene in the film, the heroine shares a kiss with her female best friend. The Romanian censors cut this scene from the official film release. *Der Dritte* was almost banned in East Germany (and many of Günther's films eventually were). While there is little evidence that the above scene was the reason for the controversy, there is some speculation that the German censors

in fact escaped the subtleties of the film, which hints at the possible lesbian relationship as the real relationship Hoffmann's character is looking for (Morton 2011). The film being allowed distribution in Romania, while simply mirroring the East German approach, can also be seen as proof that Romanian censors also missed this point. It also shows how censorship really did lack substance and discernment, being as it was simply focussed on removing the obvious from vision, while subtleties were (inadvertently) left in to do their work, with and within discerning viewers.

Being denied full exposure to explicit sex and sexuality, whether by censoring films or by editing the public image of certain film stars, Romanian audiences found a substitute of sorts in imported melodramas. In the 1970s, melodramas became an alternative to the politically- and historically-themed national productions, which offered, in their vast majority, emotionally sterile experiences (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 three 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 that year, according to *Cinema*. Montiel's popularity can be explained by the fact that, despite achieving the status of a "sex symbol in Francoist Spain" (Morcillo 2010, 244) by playing usually fallen women, her characters always had redemptive qualities and an inherent goodness,⁵ which might also be a reason why the films she starred in were usually approved by the Romanian film distributor.

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 [Rajagopalan 2008]), Bollywood 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 had opened the way for Indian cinema in the region. In 1970s Romania, two films were released that would hold audiences captive for decades (including in the post-Communist era [Bradeanu and Thomas 2006]): *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 the reason Indian films and film stars were so appealing to Soviet audiences was their "moral propriety", and the shared ideological framework might lead one to draw similar conclusions regarding the appeal of these films to Romanian audiences as well. Several of the filmgoers interviewed in Rajagopalan's book said they were attracted by the "clean" love depicted in Indian films, a "good, sincere love without aggressive sex... not some animal passion", one that coincided with "[the audiences'] worldview" (Rajagopalan 2008, 62). This proves, to an extent, that this morally pure worldview was a success achieved by the de-sexualised socialist ideology, but it is also possible that the popularity of the morality-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 did not find expression in sexuality depicted openly in films, would thus be sublimated into an affection for the highs and lows of melodrama.

Oddly enough, switch to puritanic nationalism as per the July Theses of 1971 merged with the idea of sublimated eroticism – whether embodied by the appeal of Indian melodramas, or whether suggested by the innocent romanticism advocated by certain film critics – and generated a special type of film star, which would become representative for the Romanian socialist film culture abroad. While miles away from the more explicit qualities of Western films and film stars, this lyrical quality of stardom was not without its appeal, particularly when Romanian films and film stars travelled transnationally, to other socialist countries. The cultural influence and exchange between the People’s Republic of China and Romania became mutual once the Chinese Cultural Revolution ended, in 1976. Gheorghe Vitanidis’ *Ciprian Porumbescu* (Romania, 1972), a romanticised biography of 19th century Romanian composer Ciprian Porumbescu, made the lead actor, 21-year-old Vlad Rădescu, an extremely popular star in China, something that the late Romanian film critic Alex. Leo Şerban was able to witness during his visit to China in 2004, when everyone he met nostalgically recalled Rădescu’s desirability in the film (Şerban 2016). It might be too much to call it sex-appeal, but there was certainly an erotic component in the Chinese audience’s attraction to the young Romanian actor and the dreamy artist he embodied in *Ciprian Porumbescu*. In an interview from 2015, Rădescu himself remembers the time he met a group of Chinese tourists in the lift of a Romanian hotel. Apparently, they got so flustered seeing “Ciprian Porumbescu” in the flesh that they forgot what button to press and almost broke the lift. The actor also alleged that, in 2007, both himself and director Sergiu Nicolaescu were approached for an interview by journalists from China Central Television, and he immodestly suggested 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!” (Pârnu 2015).

Rădescu attributed 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, were not saying slogans, but were holding hands and kissing” (Pârnu 2015). This seems to be a bit of an overstatement, although Dr Ming Jian, Professor of Chinese Language and Culture at the William Paterson University, does confirm that the romantic scenes in *Porumbescu* also left a “long lasting impression on Chinese audiences”. However, he recalls another Romanian film whose very mild erotic content, and the appeal of its lead female star, had an even stronger impact on Chinese audiences. Liviu Ciulei’s *The Waves of the Danube/ Valurile Dunării* (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”. According to Jian, one audience member that he interviewed referred 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 in fact it was 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” (Jian, personal communication, April 29, 2014). While Irina Petrescu’s sex-appeal in Ciulei’s film is not explicit, certain audiences may perceive her femininity itself as sexually appealing. To another extent, it is also possible to interpret this as a “nesting puritanism”, analogous to the concept of “nesting orientalisms” (Bakić-Hayden 1995). In this case, it would be a gradually decreasing sexual explicitness the further east one looks (or at least the further east in the wider socialist realm of the 1970s), which is in itself a topic worthy of further research.

Conclusion

The ways in which Romanian politics, film criticism and films themselves intertwined and interacted were complex and complicated during the 1960s, a decade of political and ideological semi-relaxation under state socialism, particularly in regards to film stardom and sexuality. Romanian audiences had some access to films and television produced in the West, and several film stars from the West continued to carry a significant erotic appeal for these audiences. By contrast, state-sanctioned film criticism aimed to disrupt these tendencies either by arguing that the objects of affection were representative of a lesser cinema, or by pointing out the decline of Western capitalism via the critique of “aberrant” manifestations of sexuality as its symptom. Sex and sexuality in Romanian film culture of the 1970s, both on- and off-screen, were further suppressed by socialist state propaganda, now programmatically aligned to the principles of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu had strived to implement from the beginning of the decade. This nationalistic focus created a certain aura of desirability for Romanian male film stars, whose lyrical qualities translated transnationally into objects of desire, though presumably limited in reach to other socialist countries.

Finally, the methodological intervention that this article has aimed to make is hopefully evident. Given the richness of thought that a historical focus on film criticism can generate and can add to the discourse surrounding films and film cultures, it is somewhat puzzling that it appears so infrequently among more traditionally popular academic approaches to film studies more generally, and indeed to star studies more specifically. This article is meant to make a reparative contribution to the broader field, and to encourage other similar approaches. At the same time, it hopefully makes evident the fact that critical discourses cannot (and should not) be analysed purely in reference to the aesthetic context in which they emerge, but also to their socio-political one. Talking about both film and theatre criticism, Miruna Runcan says that “even when it is not (or it does not seek to be) normative, critical discourse exposes, willingly or not, its axiological and ideological roots, in parallel with the aesthetic references that are on sight, in the fabric and flesh of critical reasoning” (Runcan 2017, 10). While this can be perceived as more apparent in rigidly defined socio-political contexts – such as the Cold War, or, at least as far as Western discourses have been concerned, state socialism in 20th century Eastern Europe – it can (and should) also be applied when looking at more ambiguous ones, including the globalised “all-me, all-entertainment, all-the-time” world we currently live in.

Notes

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. *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).
4. One might indeed question how *Valley of the Dolls* ended up on Romanian screens, but it is important to remember that control and censorship were not always exercised effectively, and that some “relative permissiveness” was not necessarily uncommon (Iordanova 2003, 33-34).
5. 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” (Morcillo 2010, 244).

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